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UNIVERSITY OF ALBERTA

# THE EFFECT OF RELIGIOUS CONDITIONING ON WOMEN'S SPIRITUALITY

BY

JOANNE FUGINA

A Thesis submitted to the Faculty of Graduate Studies and Research in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

MASTER OF EDUCATION

IN

COUNSELLING PSYCHOLOGY

DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATIONAL PSYCHOLOGY

EDMONTON, ALBERTA

FALL, 1991

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THE UNIVERSITY OF ALBERTA

FACULTY OF GRADUATE STUDIES AND RESEARCH

The undersigned certify that they have read, and recommend to the Faculty of Graduate Studies and Research, for acceptance, a thesis entitled THE EFFECT OF RELIGIOUS CONDITIONING ON WOMEN'S SPIRITUALITY submitted by JOANNE FUGINA in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of MASTER OF EDUCATION in COUNSELLING PSYCHOLOGY.

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Date September 23, 1991

## Abstract

The purpose of this investigation was to explore women's conflict with religious conditioning. The participants in the project included the researcher and five women who were interviewed. The women ranged in age from 35 to 54. One was from a Jewish background, two had been Roman Catholic nuns, and two were raised as Christian Protestants. The basic question asked of these women was an opening to conversation: "I am interested in your personal experience of your religious tradition; where you experienced conflict with that tradition, and what that experience was like for you". The responses to the interviews were transcribed and the researcher drew out the major conversational themes and sub-themes, the latter arising out of the contrasts in the women's defined experiences. The four themes and eight sub-themes include the following:

1. **The intrapersonal realm: Being**
   a) self-alienation
   b) self-affirmation

2. **The interpersonal realm: Relating**
   a) subordination
   b) self-assertion

3. **The transpersonal realm: Creating**
   a) determination by others
   b) self-determination

4. **The realm of renewal: Transforming**
   a) formalism
   b) process

Through these themes, the participants were able to define their conflict with traditional religion, and then define their spiritual development and the development of their autonomous selves. Although the primary focus was to investigate this developmental pattern, the implications for feminist theology might also be significant.

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## Table of Contents


1. INTRODUCTION . . . . . 1
   A. Preface . . . . . 1
   B. Formation of the Question . . . . . 2
   C. Foreunderstandings . . . . . 5

2. LITERATURE REVIEW . . . . . 7
   A. Introduction . . . . . 7
   B. The Cultural Function of Religion . . . . . 7
   C. Critique of Traditional Religion . . . . . 11
      Patriarchy . . . . . 11
      The Myth of Eve . . . . . 19
      The Process of a Woman's Conflict with Patriarchal Conditioning 26

3. METHOD . . . . . 33
   A. Introduction . . . . . 33
   B. Choosing a Method . . . . . 33
   C. Hermeneutics . . . . . 36
      The questioner . . . . . 37
      The text . . . . . 39
      The hermeneutic experience . . . . . 40
   D. Procedure . . . . . 42
      1. The Participants . . . . . 42
      2. The Conversations . . . . . 45
      3. The Process: Constructing Meaning . . . . . 48
         Transcribing the tapes . . . . . 48
         Choosing a procedure and format . . . . . 49
         Applying the procedure . . . . . 52

4. THE THEMES . . . . . 58
   A. Introduction . . . . . 58
   B. The Themes . . . . . 60
      1. The Intrapersonal Realm: Being . . . . . 60
         a) Self-alienation . . . . . 60
            Lack of identity . . . . . 60
            Invalidation of self . . . . . 65
            Destruction of integrity . . . . . 70

b) Self-affirmation . . . . . 74
Self-identity . . . . . 75
Self-worth . . . . . 81
Integration . . . . . 83
2. The Interpersonal Realm: Relating . . . . . 87
a) Subordination . . . . . 88
Hierarchy, domination, and exploitation . . . . . 89
Abuse . . . . . 96
b) Self-assertion . . . . . 99
Needing a voice . . . . . 100
Finding a voice . . . . . 105
3. The Transpersonal Realm: Creating . . . . . 108
a) Determination by others . . . . . 109
Submission . . . . . 110
Costs . . . . . 113
Dependency and disillusionment . . . . . 117
b) Self-determination . . . . . 120
Autonomy . . . . . 121
Beyond traditional systems: Declaring independence; Creatively expressing self . . . . . 124
4. The Realm of Renewal: Transforming . . . . . 131
a) Religion as formalism . . . . . 132
Blocks authentic relating . . . . . 132
Obstructs self-development . . . . . 136
Irrelevant concerns . . . . . 141
b) Spirituality as process . . . . . 145
Awareness . . . . . 146
Anger . . . . . 147
Crisis . . . . . 149
Supportive community . . . . . 152
God within . . . . . 155
Process as resolution . . . . . 159

5. DISCUSSION . . . . . 168
A. Introduction . . . . . 168
B. The Necessity for Self-definition . . . . . 169
C. Spirituality as Development of an Authentic Self . . . . . 175
1. Being . . . . . 176
2. Relating . . . . . 177
3. Creating . . . . . 177
4. Transforming . . . . . 178

D. Development as Choice . . . . . 183
Choice Within the Four Themes . . . . . 186
1. Being . . . . . 187
Choosing self-affirmation . . . . . 191
The need for self-esteem . . . . . 191
The responsibility for self-affirmation . . . . . 193
2. Relating . . . . . 196
The responsibility for self-assertion . . . . . 197
3. Creating . . . . . 199
The responsibility for self-determination . . . . . 201
4. Transforming . . . . . 203
The responsibility for process . . . . . 205
E. Implications for Religion . . . . . 209

References . . . . . 215

Appendix A . . . . . 222

Appendix B . . . . . 225

# 1. INTRODUCTION

## A. Preface

> It is . . . only because their experience is conscious that human beings have selfhood, or that they enjoy conscious identity; to be a self is to be capable of experiencing one's reality as a conscious experiencer and as the conscious agent of one's behaviour. The ability to experience reality as such and oneself as real is the essence of human, conscious life (Dewart, 1989, p. 14).

> It is difficult to find language and images for a consciousness just coming into being. It takes time and courage (Fischer, 1988, p. 14).

> Consciousness, phenomenologically speaking, is not a vague abstraction. To be conscious is always to be conscious of something. In the case of the new woman it is the coming to awareness of herself, her identity as a human person with the rights, responsibilities and potentials thereof . . . (Morton, 1985, p.13).

> Calling into question hierarchical structures and acting against oppressive social practices have contributed in every case to deepening and actualizing the new consciousness (*ibid.*, p. 16).

> What is distinctive of consciousness . . . is not that it can have identity, but that its identity is self-given and that it is the sort that can become *meaningful* to itself (Dewart, 1989, p. 244).

This thesis is the story of my engagement with the question of what women experience when they find themselves in conflict with traditional religion. It arose out of my interest in women's emerging consciousness of themselves, and my desire to understand the processes involved in their development of self-definition and self-determination. This interest, in turn, had its roots in a deep personal need to understand my own experience; specifically, my struggle to gain a confident sense of self and self-expression in a culture in which I learned,

through religious and social conditioning, to see these as illegitimate for women. I will set out my preconceptions with regard to the question after I describe how it took form.

**B. Formation of the Question**

We live in a world in which men have been defined as the legitimate constructors of knowledge and the creators of cultural images and in which women have been defined within these 'man'-made images; a world which has opposed women's self-definition and continues to resist it. Women's development has occurred and continues to occur, therefore, in a world of experience very different from that of men's. As women come to consciousness of themselves within this context they discover that, in terms of "consciousness and its attendant categories of reality, self, and other" (Dewart, 1989, p. 66) men's experience has been validated and women's denied. That is, what men have been aware of has been termed consciousness, while what women have been aware of has been labeled unconsciousness; men's interpretations of the world have been equated with reality, while women's viewpoints have been ignored and excluded; men have been dignified with selfhood while women have been seen as 'other' and denied full personhood. In this context, trying to feel legitimately an individual has been for women like running into an extremely strong headwind. It has been very difficult for women to gain a confident sense of self. Because this desire is innate, and this unfoldment necessary for psychological wholeness, women have suffered tremendously from our culture's denial of women as selves.

In spite of this, it is now becoming possible for women to develop their sense of themselves as individuals and to experience autonomy and self-definition as legitimate. How do women experience this development? What is their sense of what blocks it? Of what helps it to emerge? What are the processes involved in women's development of self-definition? These questions are of intense personal and professional interest to me. My desire to understand and facilitate women's development of consciousness (my own included) would not of itself, however, have led to the question "What do women experience when they find themselves in conflict with traditional religion?" Although I had personal experience with the impact that religious conditioning can have on women's self-development, and in my own case "calling into question hierarchical structures" had helped in "deepening and actualizing" my own consciousness (see *Preface*, page 1), I would not have thought to explore women's development of consciousness within the context of traditional religion. A connecting link was needed. This came in the form of an event which took place in February, 1988. I was reading an Edmonton newspaper when an article caught my attention. It concerned the trial of a priest in British Columbia. Scanning the article, I was shocked to discover that the man was well known to members of my family. He had been a priest for many years in a neighbouring parish in B.C., and at the time of his trial was a Monsignor in our diocese. He was subsequently convicted of fourteen counts of sexual assault against young girls, dating from 1959 to 1987. I felt tremendous anger and deep sadness when I read this. I was angry and sad that we live in a culture that fosters such abuse;

angry and sad that it is a culture in which such abuse can continue undetected for so many years.

As a result of this situation, and my reactions to it, I gained a renewed interest in women's relationship to religious institutions. I began to wonder why women remain in their religious institutions, and why they leave them. I became particularly interested in what those women who found themselves in conflict with religious tradition were experiencing. I began to see the possibility of learning a great deal about women's development of self by exploring their experience of this conflict. Regardless of what their final relationship with their religions turned out to be, I imagined that this struggle would involve a re-evaluation of their sense of self-as-woman. I realized at that point that investigating women's conflict with traditional religion would provide insights into their development within the context of society as a whole.

This exploration was compelling for an additional reason. I imagined that, in trying to come to terms with their religious traditions, women would begin to re-vision what they imagined spirituality to be. Researching women's conflict with traditional religion would then allow me to understand more deeply both women's process of self-development, and the ways in which they were beginning to re-define spiritual experience.

Enthusiastic about beginning the research, it was now necessary to decide how to phrase the question. I wanted the question to be an invitation for women to share their stories with me as freely and as fully as possible: "Story telling is the most spontaneous and basic way of naming experience. It is also an ancient and honored tool for preserving the wealth and variety of experience" (Fischer,

1988, p. 10). Therefore, the question that I asked the women who participated with me in this study took its final form as an opening to conversation: "I am interested in your personal experience of your religious tradition; where you experienced conflict with that tradition, and what that experience was like for you".

**C. Foreunderstandings**

When I read the newspaper article about the priest who was convicted of sexual abuse, I knew that one of the things that I needed to understand, and to learn how to speak about with some sense of peace was my experiences with traditional religion. I felt a deep need to connect with other women; to listen to their stories; to learn what I could from hearing about their experiences of conflict with traditional religion. As I reflected upon my experience, I became aware of some assumptions that I had about what other women might share in their stories. I imagined that they would have experienced disillusionment with external religious authority, and that this could have led to self-reflection, and then the development of greater autonomy. I thought that this would probably have been a painful process, at times frightening, requiring courage; and that the women would have experienced feelings of anger and victimization. It would be difficult, I thought, for women experiencing such conflict to remain within their traditions. Upon further reflection, I realized that many issues could create conflict with religious tradition, without involving disillusionment. For instance, women could simply disagree with the Church on a particular matter. Disillusionment, I realized, was probably related to the extent to which women

initially invested the tradition with authority and internalized its messages, and to the depth of their commitment to the spiritual quest. I also became aware that the conflict did not necessarily have to be deeply painful; that it could be a gradual process of awakening to the gap between the women's experience, and religious teachings. I also came to understand that it could be possible for women to be in conflict with their religious traditions, yet choose to remain within their tradition without compromising themselves. I returned to the question. What is involved in women's experience of conflict with religious tradition? What are women experiencing that is problematic for them? What does this reveal about women's self-development? In order to explore the question, I spoke to five women, who shared their stories with me. These stories are included in Chapter Four, *The Themes*. During the research process, I found that I was having to deal with personal issues raised by my engagement with the question. After completing *The Themes*, meeting with each woman to discuss them, and then receiving written feedback from the women (included as *Appendix A*) confirming that I had understood their experience, I was able to write an autobiographical postscript (included as *Appendix B*). Through sharing their stories, the women helped me to understand and integrate my own experience.

## 2. LITERATURE REVIEW

### A. Introduction

> I believe that it is absolutely essential for men and women in our culture to be theologically aware. We cannot ignore theological beliefs and still hope to understand what is happening to men and women today. . . .
> I also believe that any therapist who plans to work with women or couples must become thoroughly versed in the prevalent theological assumptions. Refusing to do this is unfair to their clients (Schaef, 1985, p. 161).

In this chapter I intend to show that religion is a relevant context in which to explore questions of women's self-development. Then I will provide a critique of traditional religion.

### B. The Cultural Function of Religion

Our sense of self does not arise in a vacuum. It is to a large extent the product of socialization, a process of conditioning into particular patterns of behavior and self-image that begins from the moment of our birth, and continues throughout our lifetime. In order to develop our own identities, we need to become aware of this conditioning, and how it has affected us. This involves examining the contexts in which our present sense of self has evolved: "The emergence of consciousness falls together with the emergence of questioning . . . The wish to understand and the wish to act independently are two sides of the same coin . . . Man can only understand himself by understanding his environment" (Pankow, 1976, p. 31). If we wish to understand how men and women have come to be defined in our culture, the influences that

have been brought to bear on their development of a self-image and sense of self-identity, it is particularly relevant to examine religious conditioning.

Traditional religious beliefs have permeated our civilization so deeply that they have a significant effect on all of us, even when we claim that we are not 'religious.' In his book Evolution and Consciousness, Dewart explored the development of human nature and consciousness. He claims that embedded within every culture are a few fundamental stories that profoundly influence the self-definition of its members. He calls these stories "thematic assertions and narratives", whose function is to provide a culture with "the fundamental principles of self- and world-interpretation, the all-encompassing basic ideas that define the orientation of individuals and groups and that determine, at least in outline, all else that they will think and not think" (1989, pp. 253, 251). Within any culture, religion is a main "system of assertions" which contains and develops these stories.

According to Marney and Schmidt, there are three such basic containers. In their article "Evolution of Scientific Method", they call religion, science and art "the great institutional triad." Seemingly distinct, they are also intimately connected, as three expressions of one "elemental cognitive-semiotic complex underlying all cultural development."[1] They function to link people into a web

[1] In Western civilization this 'elemental complex' of thought and language is known as patriarchy. It has been the basis on which Western civilization has been based for the past three thousand years. According to Capra, "[t]he power of patriarchy has been extremely difficult to understand because it is all-pervasive. It has influenced our most basic ideas about human nature and about our relation to the universe -- "man's" nature and "his" relation to the universe, in patriarchal language. It is the one system which, until recently, had never in recorded history been openly challenged, and whose doctrines were so universally accepted that they seemed to be laws of nature; indeed, they were presented as such" (1983, p. 29). It is a system "in which men -- by force, direct pressure, or through ritual, tradition, law and language, customs, etiquette, education and the division of labor -- determine what part women shall or shall not play, and in which the female is everywhere subsumed under the male" (Rich, 1977, p. 40).

of "socialized creativity and control" (1986, p. 185). Of the three, it is religion which serves as the macrocosmic context in which individual personality development is guided.

In Science, Order and Creativity, Bohm and Peat refer to three "dispositions, approaches, or attitudes of mind" in which cultural life can be summarized: "namely, the scientific, the artistic, and the religious" (1987, p. 260). Religion is the realm of values, and its concern is "primarily with wholeness, as can be seen in the word *holy*, which means 'whole'. Religion tends to emphasize the eternal and timeless, as well as contact with the ultimate ground of being" (*ibid.*, p. 263).

Jantsch, in The Self-Organizing Universe, developed a view of evolution, both personal and cultural, in terms of a unifying principle of self-organization. He states that in every civilization, religion guides self-organization by providing images which lead sociocultural development, and which express the "highest level of the image of man-in-universe" (1980, p. 257). This self-organization occurs as three processes: grounding, socialization, and individuation. Grounding proceeds in "physical space," which includes nature and our physical bodies, socialization in "social space", and individuation in "spiritual space" (*ibid.*, 1976, p. 233).

The word 'religion' comes from the Latin word *relegare*, which means to bind back to the source. Jantsch describes self-organization as *religio*, the "link backward to the origin" (1980, p. 301). It is a feedback process of both "integration and differentiation", a "fluctuation between oneness and dynamic duality -- individual life unfolding itself meaningfully" (*ibid.*, pp. 232, 236).

According to Jantsch, the purpose of religion is to promote individuation by providing images that guide a person back to the source, which then unifies, strengthens, and inspires them to creative action.

In theistic religions, this source is called God[2], and religion would ideally guide us to a confident sense of self and self-efficacy:

> In God are the qualities of *being*, *consciouness-intelligence* and *creative energy*. As we are what God is, a reflection of Supreme Consciousness, we likewise possess the qualities of *being*, *consciousness-intelligence* and *creative energy*. This is why all authentic scriptures declare man to be made in the image of and likeness of God. This is why self or soul-Realization results in God-Realization. By directing attention inwardly, a person can cognize the qualities of his own nature and know himself as a divine expression . . . A person is not God and never will be, but a person is a god-like being who can relate to God and work in harmony with God's will (Davis, 1976, p. 33).

Campbell, in The Power of Myth, states that religion's function in a culture is to serve the process of individuation:

> Religion is really a kind of second womb. It's designed to bring this extremely complicated thing, which is a human being, to maturity, which means to be self-motivating, self-acting (1988, p. 56).

Religion, then, through its significant images, provides the matrix in which our relationship to nature and culture is formed, and influences the development of our self-identity. It's function is to guide us to a sense of autonomy which is at the same time in harmony with the whole. Religion is therefore the pre-

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[2] Angeles, in his Dictionary of Philosophy, defines God as "that which is considered to be a (or the) fundamental source of one's existence and/or values" (1981, p. 110).

eminent cultural context in which to explore the development of women's sense of self.

## C. Critique of Traditional Religion

In this section I will begin with a brief discussion of patriarchy, move to a consideration of the myth of Eve, and then present a brief overview of one woman's process of self-development, which provides insights into the challenges facing women who find themselves in conflict with religious conditioning.

### Patriarchy

As we have seen, in Western civilization there is one underlying system of thought and language known as patriarchy, which is expressed in the fields of science, art and religion. Religion is the container of cultural values, and images which are intended to both guide the process of individual development, and bring the person into harmony with the whole. In our culture, religion reflects patriarchal values and images, and therefore understanding a feminist critique of traditional religion involves a consideration of patriarchy. Before attending to the images and values characteristic of patriarchal religion, I would like to address the nature of patriarchal consciousness itself. While traditional religion serves as the "underlying rationale for patriarchal societies" (Spretnak, 1982, p. 394), it is also a product of the consciousness which gives rise to patriarchy. It is therefore necessary to examine the characteristics of this type of consciousness, in order to get at the roots of how traditional religion is a problem for women.

For this discussion, I am indebted to Dewart's book Evolution and Consciousness.

Dewart distinguishes between two types of consciousness; *ontic*, and *phenomenal*. Ontic consciousness is "absent-minded consciousness", in which the person "speaks as if his assertions -- both his experience and his speech -- were but the repetition of what reality asserts to him." In other words, this person has lost touch with the fact that reality is not limited to his particular view of things. Phenomenal consciousness, on the other hand, is characteristic of the person who "is mindful of his own assertive nature as a speaker and experiencer and does not project his assertiveness onto the world" (1989, p. 262). What this means is that a person of 'phenomenal mind' does not equate his position with Absolute Truth, through a denial of the validity of other perspectives, and does not define others for themselves. Though one might wonder at the usefulness of ontic consciousness, which in itself is less adaptive and sane than phenomenal consciousness, Dewart points out its wider evolutionary value:

> [F]or all the dangers that the ontic consciousness poses for the human species . . . [t]he potential benefit is that exchange of information between the two forms of consciousness could bring about what neither one could produce by itself: awareness of [its] presuppositions . . . And such awareness would promote human self-adaptation -- the conscious self-selection of consciousness -- and therefore the welfare and survival of the species (*ibid.*, pp. 360-361).

The existence of the two types of consciousness presents a person with the possibility of being aware of the manner in which they are conscious, and this is

important, because both types of consciousness become pathological when taken to extremes:

> Whereas arrogance and self-righteousness are the favorite excesses of the ontic cultures, and inquisitorial torture and holy war (in either secular or religious variants) its most dangerous ones, self-effacement and self-doubt . . . are those of the phenomenal mind gone mad (*ibid.*, p. 359).

Dewart claims that, along with the other "'great religions' of the IE [Indo-European] civilizations", the Judeo-Christian tradition is an "ontic" religion: "The absent-minded projection of assertiveness explains . . . the emergence of biblical religion" (*ibid.*, p. 312). Dewart sees the pathology of traditional religion originating in its nature as an expression of ontic consciousness. Religious tradition, because it expresses the supreme values of a culture, primarily through its leading images, and because its function is to guide the formation of consciousness and identity, is the context in which the nature of ontic consciousness is most clearly revealed. Speaking of "ontic systems of religions", Dewart says:

> [T]heir dysfunctionality is itself the result of a prior affliction of consciousness that interferes with the health of the religious and secular life of man. But because religions manifest such affliction in its purest and most concentrated form, the study of religions -- if I may paraphrase Freed -- is the royal road to understanding the unconscious processes that have caused consciousness to evolve since late prehistoric times (*ibid.*, p. 305).

Through its exaggeration, ontic consciousness has created the very pathology it could have prevented. Rather than an increase in self-aware consciousness, it leads to dysfunction in both ontic and phenomenal mind. In its excesses in all patriarchal traditions, the perspective on reality that ontic consciousness has

consistently ignored, denied, rejected or by various means actively repressed has been women's perspectives. This is not to equate men with ontic mind and women with phenomenal mind. Our culture is an ontic culture, according to Dewart, and both men and women will share many of the limitations of ontic consciousness. However, men, in their socialization into dominance are encouraged to develop it, and in this way it becomes an intimate part of the masculine gender role,[3] while women are discouraged from this type of self-assertion. Capra makes a similar point in describing the dynamics of patriarchal cultures:

> [T]he self-assertive tendency keeps increasing, and with it the requirement of submission, which is not the complement to self-assertion but the reverse side of the same phenomenon. While self-assertive behavior is presented as the ideal for men, submissive behavior is expected from women (1983, p. 44).

Traditional religion, then, is problematic for women because it is grounded in the excesses of ontic consciousness, which refuses to let an 'other' stand over against itself as a "Thou", which suffers from the blindness of one "who will not see", and the deafness of one "who will not hear", and in order not to see or hear denies not only relationality, but the self-existence of the 'other'.[4] Within the terms of patriarchal religion, this means that women can not be seen as made in

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[3] Michael Kaufman, author of Beyond Patriarchy (1987), says that the definitive characteristics of masculinity in our culture are power and control.

[4] Gadamer would describe this as 'Luciferic' consciousness. He asserts that "[W]hat the world is is not different from the views in which it presents itself", and that anyone who "sets this being-in- itself over against these 'aspects' must think either theologically -- in which case the 'being-in-itself' is not for him, but only for God -- or else he will think in the manner of Lucifer, as one who would like to prove his own divinity by the fact that the whole world has to obey him -- in this case the world's being-in-itself is a limitation of the omnipotence of his imagination" (Gadamer, 1986, p. 406).

the image of God, as beings-in-themselves, if that also carries with it an assertion of their full equality with men, and the autonomy to choose and direct their own destiny. In The Blind Side of Eden: The Sexes in Perspective, Carol Lee examines the effects that Biblical imagery and teachings have had on the shaping of masculine and feminine identities, and on relationships between the sexes. She states that it is not possible to understand biblical texts unless we recognize that, rather than being a revelation of divine truth, they reveal the quality of consciousness of their authors:

> The Old Testament is a glorious myth whose deeper meaning we have buried. In it are the workings of the male mind at its most fearful, most hopeful, most punitive and most imaginative. The length, breadth and depth of the male psyche, a psyche afraid and envious of woman, pops up from the pages in resplendent technicolour. When seen as the possibility of understanding the nature of man rather than the eccentricity of a God-figure, the messages of the scriptures are startlingly clear. They are as relevant to life today as the pages of this morning's newspaper. They say this: man's fear of his own frailty and vulnerability, especially in exercising himself in the face of moral dilemmas like woman, caused him to create a superhuman God-figure (Lee, 1989, p. 201).

Women's self-development has everything to do with human development in general, because as women grow beyond the limits of patriarchy, this can lead to the evolution of ontic consciousness towards greater self-awareness. Dewart suggests that this is necessary not only for the continued evolution of consciousness, but for its continuing existence:

> [T]he only reasonable estimate of the future of the human species we can make is not a prediction, but a factual statement of the alternatives open to mankind today. Either conscious life will evolve in the direction of more highly conscious self-definition --

> or which is the the same, towards greater autonomy than has characterized it in the past -- or else conscious life will disappear from the face of the earth (Dewart, 1989, pp. 367-368).

As women become committed to self-development, they will seek cultural resources which support and foster this development, and which can guide them in the process of *re-ligio*. Inevitably this will result in women finding themselves at odds with Western religion because of its imagery and the values that this expresses. Women are seen as Eve, and this image reflects what Schneider's has called the Church's "infantilizing and demonizing of women" (1990). Men are considered to be made in the image of the Father God, a God of reason and Supreme Authority who remains separate from the world while ruling it with His divine will and law. This image reflects the value that is placed on masculine authority and dominance.

> The biblical and popular image of God as a great patriarch in heaven, rewarding and punishing according to his mysterious and seemingly arbitrary will, has dominated the imagination of millions over thousands of years. The symbol of the Father God, spawned in the human imagination and sustained as plausible by patriarchy, has in turn rendered service to this type of society by making its mechanisms for the oppression of women appear right and fitting. If God in 'his' heaven is a father ruling 'his' people, then it is in the 'nature' of things that society be male-dominated (Daly, 1973, p. 13).

It is a testimony to the pervasiveness and influence of patriarchal tradition that we can, without a sense of contradiction, describe God as the ground of all Being, in which everything that lives and moves has existence, and yet limit the image of God to a male figure.

To those who object that God is neither male nor female, but spirit which is inclusive of both genders, Lerner (1986) replies that this only reveals that God could have been imaged in ways other than a male patriarch, but that these options were not chosen. As she points out, the fact that there has been an exclusive focus on representing God as a male father-figure, without offering alternative possibilities, has profoundly affected what we consider women's nature and destiny to be:

> [F]or over 2,500 years the God of the Hebrews was addressed, represented, and interpreted as a male Father-God, no matter what other aspects He may have embodied. This was, historically, the meaning given to the symbol, and therefore this was the meaning which carried authority and force. This meaning became of the utmost significance in the way both men and women were able to conceptualize women and place them both in the divine order of things and in human society (Lerner, 1986, p. 178).

In Women and The Word, Schneiders states that the assumption that God is male has had profound consequences for women's experience of their own spirituality (1986a, p. 7), as well as for their position in society:

> As women have become aware of their inferior status and actual oppression in family, society, and Church, they have also become aware that the gender of God, God's presumed masculinity, has functioned as the ultimate religious legitimation of the unjust social structures which victimize women (*ibid.*, p. 5).

Ruether, in Sexism and God Talk, describes how the image of God as Father establishes a hierarchy of God-male-female: "Women no longer stand in direct relation to God; they are connected secondarily through the male" (1983, p. 53). In her work as a therapist and consultant to Churches, women's groups, Government agencies, and corporations, Anne Wilson Schaef uses an awareness

exercise in which she has people describe the characteristics of God, and of Humankind. She has discovered that regardless of the nature of the group, and of whether people consider themselves 'believers', agnostics or atheists, people share a universal image of God, and the first descriptor that comes up is "male". God is "male, omnipotent, omniscient, omnipresent, immortal and eternal"; Humankind is "childlike, sinful, weak, stupid or dumb, and mortal." Then she has people describe the characteristics that they associate with the terms male and female, and has found that Male means "intelligent, powerful, brave, good and strong" while Female means "emotional, weak, fearful, sinful, and like children." Her conclusion is "That Male is to Female what God is to Humankind" (1985, p. 163).

Patriarchy, as a system of hierarchical dualisms, dichotomizes human characteristics and assigns those with greater value to males. Males become normative for humanity, while women are rendered invisible and become the 'Other'. In this way, neither men nor women are able to experience full humanness. Relationships become based on dominance and subordination. Reality becomes limited to the view of the world based on men's experiences, while women's experiences are ignored or denied. According to Ruether, patriarchy as a structure generates and maintains the fallen condition of humanity, which did not come about because of sex, "but sexism -- the distortion of gender (as well as other differences between human groups) into structures of unjust domination and subordination" (*ibid.*, p. 37).

## The Myth of Eve

> If anyone should think that simply because human beings have freedom of choice they actually determine for and by themselves what they are, what they do, and what they become, he would demonstrate insufficient understanding of the nature of freedom and excessive capacity for ignoring palpable facts. The self-creativity of human beings is severely restricted. There are two reasons for this.
>
> The first is that the same thematic ability that enables human beings to make thematic assertions to themselves about themselves also enables them to make assertions about each other to each other; and to the same degree to which assertions made by others are assertively repeated by oneself, they become one's own. It is only after a human being's selfhood has matured considerably -- if ever it does -- that he can define himself autonomously. But to begin with he can define himself only by assertively repeating (to himself) what others explicity -- and, most importantly of all, implicitly -- assert to him about himself (Dewart, 1989, p. 247).
>
> With the Bible's fallen Eve and Aristotle's female as mutilated male, we see the emergence of two symbolic constructs which assert and assume the existence of two kinds of human beings -- the male and the female -- different in their essence, their function, and their potential. This metaphoric construct, the "inferior and not quite completed female," became embedded in every major explanatory system in such a way as to take on the life and force of actuality. On the unexamined assumption that this stereotype represented reality, institutions denied women equal rights and access to privileges, educational deprivation for women became justified and, given the sanctity of traditional and patriarchal domination for millennia, appeared justified and natural . . . The significance of this development for women is hard to overestimate (Lerner, 1986, p. 211).

Western civilization has been shaped by the Judeo-Christian tradition. Through its imagery, scriptures, doctrines and dogma it has been the major influence on what we think about human nature and the way we have defined

masculine and feminine psychologies. God the patriarchal Father, and Eve are the two images which structure our view of masculine and feminine psychologies. These ideas function for the most part as assumptions about what is natural, normal, and morally acceptable behavior for men and women. They are the "implicit assertions" that women have internalized, and that have therefore structured women's self-definition, and "impeded women's ability to understand their own situation and to remedy it." (Lerner, *ibid.*) As Lerner points out, in this tradition the key image around which cultural attitudes and behavior towards women has been organized is the image of Eve. In order to understand the challenges involved in women's self-development, her story is worthy of closer consideration.

In his excellent study Eve: The History of an Idea, Phillips reveals how writings about Eve at each stage in the development of Western religious thought have both demonstrated and contributed to misogynist attitudes to women. He claims that in order to understand women in Western culture it is necessary to fathom the myth of Eve:

> Her actions precipitate the fall from unity and harmony with God into estrangement and sin; into the human condition of sexual consciousness and conscience, as well as the hard realities of birth, work, and death . . She is also Everywoman, the prototypical woman . . . And, as Everywoman, her actions in Genesis . . . cause her to be regarded in Western religions as a special problem, requiring special measures for the working out of her salvation . . .
>
> Through the developing history of this theme, continually reworked and retold not only in theology but also in art, music, literature, law, and social custom, the nature and destiny of Woman in the Western world is disclosed. To follow the path of Eve is to discover much about the identity that has been imposed upon

> women in Western civilization. If one would understand Woman, one must come to terms with Eve (Phillips, 1984, p. *xiii*).

There are three aspects to the Eve story which have consequences for women's development: her origin, her act of 'sin', and the results of that act. In Genesis there are two creation stories, Genesis I, in which man and woman are created equally in the image of God, and Genesis II, where Eve is created from Adam's rib. Genesis I is actually the later account, written several hundred years after what is called Genesis II. Mary Daly, in The Church and the Second Sex (1985) points out the differing implications in accepting one or the other account. If we favor Genesis I, this means that "The image of God is in the human person, whether male or female," whereas Genesis II is "The foundation upon which the case for women's subordination is built" (1985, p. 77). Daly states that reversing the order of the two accounts both provides support for sexism, and obscures the "evolution of human consciousness" from dominance/ subordination to equality between the sexes that the actual chronological order of the two versions suggests (*ibid.*). Phillips says that male religious leaders were aware of the social and political consequences in emphasizing one account over the other, and deliberately chose to favor the older version, known as Genesis II:

> We have already noted that in favoring the second account of Eve's creation over the first (which they did almost without exception), the early rabbis surmised that each version carried important implications for the religious and social order. If the woman is created simultaneously with the man, she is 'perfect' also, and shares equally in the work of lordship. If she is created after him, she is somewhat less than perfect and belongs to the realm over which he exercises lordship. In preferring the second account, then, interpreters prefer an Eve who is religiously, socially,

> politically and sexually under the control of her husband (*ibid.*, p. 30).

The consequences of this choice, for women, have been overwhelming. In the older version Eve, the first woman, is said to have sinned, which led to alienation from God and the resulting suffering. Somehow, Eve subsequently becomes transformed into all women, who then must be dealt with according to "special measures" in order to be reunited with God, bound back to the source. Both Eve's sin, and the 'special measures' necessary for her salvation, have been variously interpreted during the history of the myth. Her sin has been ascribed to her frivolous amorality, gullibility, pride, greed, or sensuality. She is supposedly prey to sensuality through her lack of "moral strength and reasoning skill" (*ibid.*, pp. 57-61). Although pride was frequently the favored explanation for her sin, according to Phillips the interpretation with the greatest influence on both Judaic and Christian thought was that of Eve's sensuality:

> Man symbolizes mind, and woman symbolizes sense . . . In the struggle between humanity and the Devil, the woman is naturally more vulnerable because of her greater sensuality (*ibid.*, p. 61).

This division of human characteristics into masculine and feminine properties, which carried with it many other associations, and the linking of the 'feminine' trait with evil, both reflected and promoted fear and hatred of women. Through their supposed sensuality, women are seen as evil, and a danger to men:

> The idea of Eve as weak thus joins with the idea that Eve is demonic. Having been seduced because of her weakness, she is able to seduce her husband because she is filled with the power of the Devil (*ibid.*, p. 64).

These speculations about Eve's character, which were then used to define women's nature, had very real consequences for actual women. They led to the "special measures" thought necessary for women's salvation: subordination, and execution. The characterization of women as demonic found its ultimate expression in the burning of women as witches, which took place over a period of at least two hundred years, from the mid-fifteenth to the late seventeenth century. This was a well-organized endeavor, sanctioned and led by the clergy, and approved by the social order. The Malleus Maleficarum, the authoritative text on how to identify, torture and exterminate these women was written by two Dominican priests, one an ambassador of the Pope, the other "a future Dean of the Faculty of Theology at the University of Cologne" (*ibid.*, p. 70). Phillips makes explicit the link between the story of Eve, and the misogyny that results in the "special measures" used to deal with women:

> Witchcraft [sic] depends on a perverse political logic expressed in a less obviously perverse form by Milton in his depiction of the paradisaical relationship between Adam, Eve, and God: 'He for God only, she for God in Him.' The man alone may relate directly to God, and the woman's purpose is to work out her salvation by serving and loving the man. The *Malleus* sees Eve as specially related to Satan in a way Adam cannot be, capable of exercising a demonic power over her husband. Her special role in The Fall story, when combined with the mysteries of blood and sexuality associated with women, results in a prototypical woman who is for *Satan* only, and an Adam who must constantly guard himself against The Satan that is in her. Had Adam 'eliminated' the woman (on Milton's terms by divorce, on the terms of the *Malleus*' by actual execution) Satan would have had no power over him (*ibid.*, p.72).

While this "perverse political logic" no longer results in the execution of women, it continues to be expressed in the subordination of women, the 'special measure' which has been consistently employed throughout the history of Judeo-Christianity to 'save' women. Phillips traces the development of the Eve myth throughout the Protestant Reformation, and notes that the emphasis shifts from Eve's sinfulness, to the necessity for her subordination:

> Where earlier exegetes had held that one or another of Eve's womanly traits latent in her since creation had led to the fall of humanity, the Protestant exegetes blamed her for leaving the watchful eye of her husband, and him for allowing her to do it. She is a failure as a helpmeet (*ibid.*, p. 106).

In answering the apologists who claim that the modern Protestant view of Eve acknowledges her full humanity and equality with man, Phillips examines the work of Karl Barth, whose "doctrine of woman" in Church Dogmatics, he claims, "is central to the understanding of the whole subject of Christian ethics" (*ibid.*, p. 106). He credits Barth with a respectful consideration of Eve, and for his emphasis on the Christian life as relationality for both men and women. In exploring Barth's assertions of women's equality with men, he says that Barth "pushes scripture as far as it can go toward a positive picture of Eve" (*ibid.*, p. 108). However, he concludes that in Barth's vision of equality, some are more equal than others. He cites the following passage, in which Barth presents his interpretation of the appropriate relation between women and men as it is revealed in the story of Adam and Eve:

> The point of the . . . saga is that woman is of man. This does not mean . . . that she is man's property. Nor does it mean that unlike him she is not a human being in the first sense. What it does

> mean is that in her being and existence she belongs to him; that she is ordained to be his helpmeet; that without detriment to her independence she is the part of him which was lost and is found again (*ibid.*, p. 110).

According to Phillips, in the final analysis, Barth can not "move beyond Paul's Genesis: Woman's only secure path to salvation is marriage, in which she is to understand herself as B, her husband as A" (*ibid.*, p. 115). The Catholic position is clear. In its ban on birth control, women's destiny is a subordinate marriage, or the convent. Reflecting on modern interpretations of Eve's sin, we return in a sense to the same issue that led early religious leaders to emphasize Genesis II over Genesis I. In Phillips words, "[H]er unfaithfulness to her husband and to God really involves her independence" (*ibid.*, p. 102).

With an interpretation of Eve's sin as her independence, Genesis II becomes the story of man's reaction at woman's attempt at liberation, at becoming an autonomous individual. Where the human Adam took the fruit, was willing to accept the new relationship, the old God-image, the superego, the "Fixed Idea", cursed the change. And so it continues today. There is tremendous resistance in traditional religion to seeing women as beings for themselves as well as others, valuable as persons in their own right, rather than solely in terms of their reproductive function and social role of "helpmeet" to men. It was a massive lobby by religious fundamentalists that defeated ratification of the Equal Rights Amendment in the United States several years ago, and that continues to lobby against other pro-feminist legislation on the grounds that it would "upset 'God's natural law' and disturb the 'natural role of the sexes'" (Spretnak, 1982a, p. *xi*)[5].

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[5] See also "The Christian Right's 'Holy War' Against Feminism" in The Politics of Women's Spirituality (Spretnak, 1982b, pp. 470 - 497).

For large numbers of Christians, women's development must be constrained within the limits imposed by patriarchy. These Christians have prevented women from being guaranteed equality under law because they are committed to maintaining the 'stability' of the patriarchal family, which means, to females, subordination.

The story of Eve is not a harmless tale, an artifact of times past. It came to prominence out of a political decision to maintain women's subordination, in spite of scriptural precedent for an alternative vision (it was that choice which was the true Fall into alienation), and it continues to function as a set of assumptions that deny women full personhood. Phillips comments on the myth's tenacity and influence:

> [T]he myth of Eve . . . remains deeply imbedded in both male and female ideas about the nature and destiny of women, and the attitudes it has engendered are embodied in the psychology, laws, religious life, and social structures of the Western world -- not to mention the most intimate of human activities. Eve is very much alive, and every member of Western society is affected by her story (Phillips, 1984, p. 172).

## The Process of a Woman's Conflict With Patriarchal Conditioning

> Who is the creator of your existence? To whom do you listen for your identity and for the shaping of your destiny? If talking about human experience is a way of talking about God, and talking about God a way of talking about our life together, we have already begun to do theology (Morton, 1985, p. 69).

> The goal . . . is growth in the Spirit, not the maintenance of the present social or religious system (Fischer, 1988, p. 125).

When women begin to find themselves in conflict with religious conditioning, what are they experiencing? What is involved in this struggle? What are they beginning to learn about themselves? What helps them to come to terms with their experience? When I turned to the literature on the feminist response to traditional religion it was with these questions in mind. I was seeking insight into the process of women's struggle with religious conditioning, and for ways of working with that process, and I was looking for women's stories, in which women describe their personal process of self-development. Although she was not raised in a family that was traditionally religious, Kim Chernin's book Reinventing Eve: Modern Woman in Search of Herself provided both.

Reinventing Eve is the story of Chernin's personal struggle to find psychological wholeness and develop an authentic sense of self in spite of her experience that "insurmountable obstacles to a woman's development arise from the culture in which she comes of age" (1987, p. *xiv*). Her "theologizing" centred on the question of what was necessary to "bring about the future unfolding of the female psyche" (*ibid.*). She felt that this was a task all women in our culture were faced with, and knowing that the answer could not be provided for her by any theory, but could only be born out of her own personal struggle with the question, she committed herself to living with the question as a central focus of her experience. This was a courageous decision, because she prided herself on being a woman "who had learned how to reason abstractly", and now she realized that she had to "shift the focus of my preoccupation from theories about experience to the experience itself" (*ibid.*, p. 38). She described

her journey to wholeness and insight as a process in four stages, Initiation, Descent, Underworld, and Disobedience, and shared thoughts, feelings, dreams, life events, and questions that were significant to her at each stage.

**Initiation:** Initiation is a process that can go on in fits and starts for many years. It is a gradual awakening to a sense of inauthenticity; a realization that as women we have modeled our sense of who we are according to a 'man'-made image, one fashioned to meet the needs of patriarchal culture, in which our identity is restricted to the role of wife and mother.

One aspect of Chernin's initiation involved a conflict between her sense of the divine, and religious teachings that God is "male and unknowable", and that spirit is "an elusive essence that hovered unattainably outside of human reach" (*ibid.*, p. 37). She described how through an "immediate, intensely felt relationship to the universe" she experienced the immanence of the divine "weaving together thinking and feeling, perceiving and being in a linked participation that gave order, meaning and direction to life" (*ibid.*).

Initiation culminates with a woman seriously questioning her identity as a woman in a culture which alienates her from herself. As Chernin puts it, initiation is "the meeting place of self with history, the spiritual with the political, the intensely personal with the power relations of a troubled world" (*ibid.*, p. 25).

**Descent:** Descent follows initiation. It is an experience of the 'wasteland', when women discover that there are no images or stories in their culture that speak to them; that there is no nourishment for their souls. At this point women

confront the division between their 'inner' and 'outer' selves. This can be experienced as a paralyzing conflict, which seems unresolvable. Healing the conflict requires "a dropping down into the self" (*ibid.*, p. 64), descending into the depths of self-division by opening to repressed emotions and events from childhood that are so painful they have not been integrated into awareness. Chernin speaks of this in symbolic terms as contacting our abandoned inner child, but reminds us that healing cannot occur until the child "is translated from the symbolic to the emotional sphere" (*ibid.*, p. 64).

Describing her own experience of descent Chernin spoke of "Tears I could not weep, a soul-suffering disguised by eating, a sense of being torn apart at some deep, sensitive core of myself" (*ibid.*, p. 73). According to Chernin, while reason is needed to help give form to our experience, there are times when we need to have the courage to set it aside. Integrating repressed emotions occurs not through reason, but through directly encountering them, and allowing ourselves to be with them, and to bear them. The process of emotional integration provides the possibility for reason and intuitive truth to harmoniously co-exist. Through this development, reason does not block intuitive truth, but becomes transformed by it.

**Underworld:** The journey to the underworld is a process of questioning, characterized by "holding polar opposites together" (*ibid.*, p. 86), being able to endure contradiction, and to consider an issue from two contrasting perspectives. As Chernin says, "One goes down into the underworld to ask why" (*ibid.*, p. 94); to try to understand the sources of self-alienation, and to recover wholeness through seeing into cultural patterns and integrating cultural conditioning. It

involves questioning received knowledge, examining personal beliefs and assumptions, and then constructing meaning. According to Chernin, meaning only has value in the underworld when it has been constructed out of personal experience.

Chernin came to understand that as they are growing up, women need stories, images, or representatives of female power as inspiration for their development. She states that women need to understand the effect that early socialization into the feminine gender role has had on their development, and to resolve it, in order to regain a sense of female power.

**Disobedience:** According to Chernin, women's quest for an authentic self in patriarchal culture culminates in disobedience, which is assertion of their independence. This became clear for her as she worked with images that arose in her poetry and clay models. She realized that the figure she was sculpting, and writing about, was Eve. She began to explore Judeo-Christian theology, with a focus on understanding how women had been portrayed in these writings. She came to understand that Eve, the archetypal image of woman in Western civilization, had been completely misrepresented, and concluded that rather than being a sinner, Eve was a wisdom-figure. Eve's story was actually "an account of women's necessary disobedience -- a tale of wisdom seeking" (*ibid.*, p. 162).

When Chernin first began to come to this realization, she doubted herself: "How could I dare to imagine that Eve, in whose name women for so long have been associated with sin and its punishment, was actually a heroine?" (*ibid.*, p. 148). She reviewed the writings of Jewish and Christian religious authorities, and as she put it, "I was beginning to get cold feet" (*ibid.*, p. 150). With further

reflection and study, she gained confidence in the truth of her own insight, based on her own struggle for self-determination. She became able to honour her own truth, even if it was not supported by the voice of authority:

> Without doubt, these statements carried the authority of the ages, of powerful and enduring patriarchal tradition. But they were, on the other hand, mere human utterance (*ibid.*, p. 151).

Chernin felt that it was very important for women to reclaim and revision the image of Eve, because it played such a part in our culture's subordination of women, and in their loss of a sense of self:

> The transformation of woman is a work of archetypal dimension and significance. To change fundamentally the nature of woman, it would be necessary to transform the archetype itself (*ibid.*, pp. 148 - 149).

In coming to a new understanding of the myth of Eve, Chernin felt that women would come to understand what was required of them in order to reclaim their sense of self and take charge of their own development.

> In my reading of her tale Eve becomes a heroine of disobedience . . . Eve as rebel, the first woman to challenge the subjugation of woman in the patriarchal garden.
> Eve's dilemma: a choice between obedience and knowledge. Between renunciation and appetite. Between subordination and desire. Between security and risk. Between loyalty and self-development. Between submission and power. Between hunger as temptation and hunger as vision. It is the dilemma of modern women (*ibid.*, pp. *xvi* and 182).

According to Chernin, claiming the authority of her own experience of the Divine is, for a woman, "her own gesture of self-repose" (*ibid.*, p. 25).

Carol Christ, in Diving Deep and Surfacing (1980), speaks of the importance of women telling their stories, as a way for other women to understand their own experience:

> Women's stories have not been told. And without stories there is no articulation of experience. Without stories a woman is lost when she comes to make important decisions. She does not learn to value her struggles, to celebrate her strengths, to comprehend her pain. Without stories she cannot understand herself. Without stories she is alienated from those deeper experiences of self and world that have been called spiritual or religious. She is closed in silence. The expression of women's spiritual quest is integrally related to the telling of women's stories. If women's stories are not told, the depth of women's souls will not be known (p. 1).

In my review of the literature, I had been seeking for women's personal accounts of their conflict with traditional religious conditioning. With the exception of A Woman and Catholicism (1987), which is Sheelagh Conway's account of her break with the Roman Catholic faith, I found that women's stories of personal struggle with religious tradition have not been told. The present research therefore makes a needed contribution to the literature in this area.

# 3. METHOD

## A. Introduction

This chapter begins with a discussion of my search for a method that would best serve the intentions of the question; the factors I took into consideration in deciding how to proceed with the study. Then I move to a brief discussion of hermeneutics. Following this I set out the procedure I followed in conducting the research.

## B. Choosing a Method

All methods of inquiry arise out of human experience; they are human creations and as such express the world views of those who formulated them. They contain *a priori* assumptions about the nature of "truth", how to seek it, and for what purposes. No research, therefore, is value-free. At every step of the research process choices enter in: from the questions we think are important to ask and the manner in which we ask them, to decisions about what constitutes the data and how it is to be analyzed or interpreted. These choices reflect the researcher's values, beliefs, and history of experience.

In deciding upon a method to employ, it is important to ensure that the one we choose is appropriate to the question being asked. The questions researchers ask arise out of their own interests and purposes, and methodologies are the tools used to achieve the intentions inherent in the research question; therefore, bias is inevitable at both these steps of the process. Since bias cannot be avoided, it needs to be addressed. This can be done by the researcher's self-reflection and subsequent explication of the values which have informed her choices.

In this study I asked women the following question: "I am interested in your personal experience of your religious tradition; where you experienced conflict with that tradition, and what that experience was like for you". The question points to three values. First, there is a concern for bringing forth women's perspectives. Second, there is an interest in experience. Third, what is being sought is to create a context in which meaningful personal experience can be brought to language for the purposes of understanding. It was necessary therefore that any method I chose meet three requirements. It had to (1) allow the women to share their stories with the least constraints and the greatest comfort possible; (2) accommodate a focus on experience; and (3) facilitate understanding, rather than knowledge for the purposes of prediction and control, as a research objective. All three requirements are linked, in their sensitivity to women as participants in the research process. Schneiders (1986a), speaking of the priority given to experience over theory by religious women seeking to deepen their understanding of religious life, confirms its value in this regard:

> Women's tendency to assign priority to experience, to theorize out of experience rather than to allow theory to prescribe and limit experience, should not be regarded as a pedestrian incapacity for high level speculation. On the contrary, it is a sure instinct for the real nature of religious life which is not a static essence to be described and analyzed but first and foremost a life to be lived, an historical reality which is ever-changing and unpredictable. Experience enjoys a real priority over theory in relation to life . . . (pp. 2-3).

In Women's Ways of Knowing, Belenky *et al.* (1986) make a distinction between understanding and knowledge that brings out implications for working with women in research: "Understanding involves intimacy and equality

between self and object, while knowledge implies separation from the object, and mastery over it" (pp. 100-101).

In her study on women and depression, Holmgren (1987) reviewed the literature on feminist methodology, and set out three criteria she arrived at in evaluating whether a particular method was appropriate to use in her research with women. The method should (1) eliminate as much as possible "power differentials between researcher and respondent", and ensure that the women "not [be] treated as objects of study"; (2) have the capability to both bring forth women's experience and to acknowledge "that [women's] experience as a valid information base rather than imposing a pre-conceived knowledge base"; (3) make it possible for women "to talk about their experience and be heard by themselves and others" (p. 47). Clearly, any method that is in accord with these principles of feminist methodology would satisfy the requirements that I had established in my search for a method appropriate to my question.

In her study, Holmgren (*ibid.*) decided to use Gadamer's dialectical hermeneutics as a method, because of its compatibility with feminist methodology. In comparing the two approaches, she lists the following areas of agreement. Both (1) "contend that value-free, neutral knowledge is a myth perpetuated by positivist-based, empirical science"; (2) "propose that stating as clearly as possible our values and preconceptions can enhance the research process as long as the validity of these values and preconceptions is suspended in the process and left open to reconceptualization"; (3) emphasize "the value of experience as a source of understanding and knowledge" (p. 51).

I was intrigued by hermeneutics and therefore undertook to study it, which included reading, among other materials, Gadamer's Truth and Method. I was particularly impressed by Sellick's (1989) application of the method in her thesis, Psychotherapy as Hermeneutics: The Client's Story. Through this reading, I concluded that hermeneutics was the method most fitting for me to use in my research.

## C. Hermeneutics

> Hermeneutics involves an attempt to describe and study meaningful human phenomena in a careful and detailed manner as free as possible from prior theoretical assumptions, based instead on practical understanding (Packer, 1985, p. 1081).

The New Webster Encyclopedic Dictionary defines the word 'hermeneutics' as follows: "The art or science of interpretation", and locates its root in the Greek word *hermeneus*, 'an interpreter'. Hermeneutics is an ancient discipline (Packer, *ibid.*), which became widely applied during the seventeenth century in the examination of theological texts. Originally concerned with the interpretation of biblical material, its use gradually generalized to other areas, particularly law. Eventually, through the work of Schleiermacher and Dilthey, its application was extended to include questions of understanding in the humanities (Packer, *ibid.*).

Currently, hermeneutics is maintained in the tradition of Schleiermacher and Dilthey by theorists who posit that objectively valid knowledge is possible, and who focus on methodological principles of interpretation. According to Palmer (1969), this position can be contrasted with the one held by theorists in the

tradition of Heidegger and Gadamer. Here, the concern is to explore the nature of understanding and experience. There is no claim to objective knowledge. Rather, there is the recognition that, because we are always immersed in history, understanding is inevitably contextual. It is in this second tradition, primarily in the work of Gadamer, that the methodology of this study is grounded. When I use the word 'hermeneutics' in the following pages, it is to this tradition that I refer.

What attracted me to hermeneutics, as expounded by Gadamer, is that it is a profoundly ethical and humanistic approach. As a methodology, it is concerned not so much with procedures, but with coming to an understanding of the nature of text in general and the challenges that it brings to the questioner. Thereby, it reveals to the questioner the manner in which to approach any specific text (in this case, descriptions of experience) such that an understanding of that text becomes possible.

In exploring hermeneutics, we need to consider three factors: the questioner, the text, and what arises between them, that is, the hermeneutic experience. Let us begin with the questioner.

**The questioner:** In order for the hermeneutic experience to be possible, two things are initially required of the questioner. The questioner must ask a genuine question and she must become conscious of the hermeneutic situation, which includes her foreunderstandings.

Central to the hermeneutic experience is the idea of the question, for it is "implicit in all experience" (Gadamer, 1986, p. 325). The question arises out of

the researcher's previous experience, and finds its place in an attitude of openness to new experience. For a question to be genuine rather than simply apparent, it must be grounded in 'not-knowing' and it must be asked. The asking of the question implies its openness:

> . . . the way in which dialectic proceeds is by way of question and answer or, rather, by way of the development of all knowledge through the question. To ask a question means to bring into the open. The openness of the question consists in the fact that the answer is not settled (*ibid.*, p. 326).

This movement from an awareness of 'not-knowing' into a genuine question characterizes the hermeneutic situation. A genuine question is both open, and limited, because it has some direction. While it opens up that which is questioned, it also sets it within a certain frame. In this way, the question establishes a horizon of meaning for the answer. A genuine question is a meaningful question when it allows for the possibility of understanding. In order to ask a relevant question, the researcher needs to be aware of her preconceptions.

> If a person is trying to understand something, he will not be able to rely from the start on his own chance previous ideas . . . Rather, a person trying to understand a text is prepared for it to tell him something. That is why a hermeneutically trained mind must be, from the start, sensitive to the text's quality of newness. But this kind of sensitivity involves neither 'neutrality' in the matter of the object nor the extinction of one's self, but the conscious assimilation of one's own fore-meanings and prejudices (*ibid.*, p. 238).

The process of coming to consciousness of foreunderstandings is a required part of hermeneutic inquiry. In Chapter One I spoke of the preconceptions I

was aware of holding at the start of the research process that seemed relevant to this study. Preconceptions, rather than being problematic, are the stuff out of which understanding becomes possible. They are necessary, for without them, there is no perspective from which to approach the text.

> . . . The hermeneutical experience always includes the fact that the text to be understood speaks into a situation that is determined by previous opinions. This is not a regrettable distortion that affects the purity of understanding, but the condition of its possibility, which we have characterized as the hermeneutic situation (*ibid.*, p. 429).

Foreunderstandings, while necessary, must be made conscious so that they do not stand in place of the text. Then they can be used so that the meaning of the text asserts itself. In this process, the interpreter risks her foreunderstandings by remaining conscious of their provisional nature, while opening herself to the horizon of the text. Questioning the text, she is also questioned by it. This dialectical relationship is fundamental to the hermeneutic experience. Before proceeding to a discussion of the hermeneutic experience, I would like to say a few words about the text.

The text: "Being that can be understood is language" (*ibid.*, p. 432). In Truth and Method, when Gadamer uses the word 'text', he appears to be referring to language in written form. That is the sense in which I use it here, as the text I was working with was typed transcripts of conversations, and then my written interpretations of those transcripts. However, text does not necessarily have to be in written form. In the above quote, Gadamer points to the essential feature of text, which is language. The text does not bring to us 'raw' experience, but rather descriptions of experience, experience as it exists "in language".

Therefore, when we say that we have reached *an* understanding of the text, we are claiming to understand not the person *per se*, or the experience *per se*, but at best, one perspective of the truth of what they have said to us about their experience. Acknowledging this, we respect the integrity of the person as experiencer, and recognize the limits to our understanding; that it is provisional, and always remains open to new interpretations.

> The experience of the 'Thou' . . . manifests the paradoxical element that something standing over against me asserts its own rights and requires absolute recognition; and in that very process is 'understood' . . . [But] this understanding does not at all understand the 'Thou', but what the 'Thou' truly says to us (*ibid.*, p. xxiii).

In the process of interpretation, the text, as the written record of what is spoken, becomes the 'Thou' in the dialectical relationship which is the hermeneutic experience.

**The hermeneutic experience:** The hermeneutic experience is characterized by an involved stance; engagement between an interpreter and a text. As Gadamer describes this relationship, it is not that of subject to object but rather of an 'I' with a 'Thou'. Thinking of the text as a 'Thou' reminds us that it is 'other' not in the sense of an object to be mastered, but 'other' in that it always offers the possibility of new meaning. The fact that understanding is provisional does not suggest that it is imperfect, but rather that it is perspectival. Every interpretation is a 'view' of the 'Thou'. It arises within a historical context and so remains always open to re-interpretation. It is also always a 'view' from the perspective of the interpreter, the 'I' in the relationship. This view is not 'given', but is constructed in the act of interpretation. Interpretation is not, therefore,

"mere repetition of the text", but "a new creation of understanding" (*ibid.*, p. 430).

The relationship of interpreter with text, which gives rise to understanding, is characterized by a potentially unending movement from whole to part and back again, context to text and back again, understanding to questioning and back again which Gadamer calls the hermeneutic circle. In the next section, *Procedure*, I will say more about this, and discuss how it was applied in this study. As we have seen, the hermeneutic experience begins with a questioner who is conscious of the hermeneutic situation and who asks a genuine question. Through opening herself to the "thou" of the text, letting herself experience it, and letting it speak to her, she is able to construct a meaningful interpretation and gain greater understanding:

> . . . The experience of the 'Thou' [is] decisive for all self-understanding. . . . One truth I refer to is the truth that becomes visible to me only through the 'Thou', and only by my letting myself be told something by it (*ibid.*, p. xxiii).

This understanding leads to the recognition of the necessity for openness to further experience, and thus to the continued movement of questioning and understanding.

> The hermeneutical consciousness has its fulfillment, not in its methodological sureness of itself, but in the same readiness for experience that distinguishes the experienced man by comparison with the man captivated by dogma (*ibid.*, p. 325).

As Gadamer points out, it is in this openness to new experience that the integrity of the hermeneutical consciousness is realized.

## D. Procedure

In this section I explain how I found the five women who participated in this project with me, and briefly introduce them. Next, I describe how we came into conversation and what took place during that time. Finally, I set out the process that I followed in producing the transcripts and then working with the text to bring forth my understanding of the women's experience as it is presented in Chapter Four, *The Themes*.

### 1. The Participants

When I was considering how many women to interview, it was suggested by Vanderwell (1989) that three would probably be the minimum number required to begin to establish a pattern. When one person is interviewed, the resulting process involves a case study, whereas including two individuals in the sample serves best to identify dichotomies. I wanted a rich textual source, and so decided to speak with five women.

Becker (1986, p. 105) points out that there may be both "preferred interviewers" and "preferred interviewees" when investigating lived experience. Interviewers who have had personal experience with the issue being explored in the conversations may be better equipped to establish rapport and integrate data from the interviews. Preferred participants are those who "are centrally involved with the phenomena, and have many life experiences of it to talk about" (*ibid.*). I sought out two women because I felt that they would have extensive personal experience to share. When I told them about this study they were enthusiastic, and voluntarily agreed to participate. Another two women volunteered to be

included in the project after hearing of it through word-of-mouth information. The fifth woman approached me after an announcement about the study at a women's support group, and requested that she be interviewed.

Each woman was a unique person who brought her own particular history of experience and individual sensitivity to the question. One woman had a high school diploma followed by secretarial training. She was a homemaker, and under difficult circumstances was cheerfully caring for her mother who was ill. Another woman had an undergraduate degree, and additional training for the ministry. She was actively working as a minister during the period of this research. The other three women were also employed. Two had undergraduate degrees, and one had a Master's degree. The women ranged in age from 35 to 54. One was married, one was separated, one was divorced, and two were single. Three of the women had children. Western Biblical traditions were the source of early religious training for all of the participants. One was brought up in the Jewish faith, two had been Roman Catholic nuns, and two were raised as Christian Protestants.

Before the conversations began, I knew very little about the women personally. With the exception of one woman, I did not know what their present relationship to their religious tradition was. I had no idea whether they still retained their traditional religious beliefs, or if they went to church, or what their level of commitment was to their tradition. The *only* thing I knew was that they had experienced conflict with their religious tradition and were willing to talk about it. In the course of our dialogues I learned that two women remained associated with their traditions, while three did not.

Again, with one exception, I had no idea whether they were associated in any way with the feminist movement until we spoke together in the conversations. As it turned out, only one woman identified herself as a feminist. Another woman said she was uncomfortable with feminism because she did not want to be unduly influenced by, or identified with, any particular system of thought. However, as she enumerated her points of agreement with ideas that she considered to be feminist, she laughingly said "Maybe I am [a feminist]". The other three women did not consider themselves to be feminists, although through our conversations it became clear that many of their ideas would be compatible with a feminist orientation.

It was also only through our dialogues that I learned that, without exception, all five women had been in counseling to work on personal issues. Several of the women had sought counseling to deal specifically with issues around their loss of religious faith.

I feel very thankful for having had the opportunity to meet and speak with the five women who were co-creators of this project. Each woman, simply through being who she was and expressing herself in her own unique way, brought a special gift to me, and made a special contribution to the study. I am very grateful for the openness with which they shared their stories, and feel privileged to have been admitted into their confidence. They risked a great deal in opening to experiences that were at times quite painful to recall. I believe that this became possible because they knew that I genuinely sought to understand their world as they expressed it to me, and because we shared a commitment to bring to language and explore together their conflict with religious tradition. I

deeply value what I learned from our conversations. Thank you Jen, Kayde, Miriam, Monique, and Pat.

## 2. The Conversations

When I was ready to begin the interviews I contacted each of the participants by phone to set up a time that was convenient for them. I asked them where they would like the conversations to take place, with the only condition being that it be a quiet, private place where we could talk without interruption. Three of the women chose to be interviewed in their homes, one came to my apartment, and I met one woman once in her office and twice in my apartment. I also briefly described the nature of the research that I was doing. I stated the question that I wanted to explore with them, and explained that my interest in women's spiritual experience, more specifically their conflict with religious tradition, arose in part out of my own struggle to come to terms with the effects of my Roman Catholic upbringing. I said that I felt a sense of "not knowing" what other women experienced when they found themselves in conflict with their religious tradition, and that I sought to understand this by speaking directly with women about their experience. I asked for their permission to audiotape our conversations, and told them that I would be transcribing the tapes, and would provide them with a transcript. They were informed of the measures that would be taken to ensure confidentiality, and they were told that if there was any information in the transcripts that they thought might identify them, it would be removed at their request. They were advised that they would be asked to sign a "consent to participate" form when we met.

I met with the women anywhere from one to three times to explore their experience, and then two subsequent times, once to provide them with a copy of their transcript, and a final time to discuss the research results and their participation in the process. I initiated each conversation with the following, or a similar, comment: "What I am interested in hearing about is your own personal experience with your religious tradition; where you experienced conflict with your religious tradition, and what that experience was like for you". Becker (1986), in her excellent survey of the theory and process of interviewing in human science research, describes two basic approaches used by researchers: "Some treat each interviewee as an independent unit, and do not attempt to cross-validate themes. . . . Others generate a pool of questions as interviews progress, and ask each subject to respond to these questions" (p. 116). I chose to keep the conversations loose and unstructured. My purpose was to let the women tell their stories as freely and as fully as possible:

> Real questioning has no methods, no knowing -- just wondering freely, vulnerably, what it is that is actually happening inside and out (Packer, 1990, p. 9).

I was genuinely interested to know what would emerge of its own accord out of this process. For the most part, the conversations flowed along according to the lead given to them by the women, and I attempted to respond to this lead. Whenever I felt uncertain about what was being said, I requested clarification. At times I would ask the women to elaborate when I needed more information in order to understand a particular aspect of their experience. I would also encourage them to continue when we had reached a pause in the conversation, but felt that more remained to be said.

While the women led the dialogues for the most part, they experienced that the dialogues also led them. This was revealed in their surprise at being able to share their experience so openly, or to articulate it as fully and as clearly as they did:

> We say that we 'conduct' a conversation, but the more fundamental a conversation is, the less its conduct lies within the will of either partner. . . . The way in which one word follows another, with the conversation taking its own turnings and reaching its own conclusion, may well be conducted in some way, but the people conversing are far less the leaders of it than the led" (Gadamer, 1986, p. 345).

The conversations were a wonderful experience for me. Even when I had done most of the interviews, I continued to be aware at the beginning of each conversation of entering into the unknown, where a world lay waiting to emerge out of a richness of possibilities, a world that would take shape, in its own way, out of the quality of our meeting. I sensed that the women also felt this. Neither of us knew what we were going to say, or what was going to surface, or where the conversation was going to lead. There was a sense of mutual exploration. This unstructured approach seemed to be very comfortable for the women. It allowed them to enter into issues in their own way, and at their own pace. As the conversations unfolded, there was the sense of entering a flow together. Topics would come into focus and we would follow them until it seemed that no more needed to be said, or until they led into other issues. There were exhilarating moments of shared insight, moments when we sat silently together as they touched their pain, shared moments of laughter. As they brought their experience into language during our conversations there was a

shared sense of discovery and coming to meaning. We continued to meet until we mutually felt a sense of closure. With one of the women, this occurred at the end of the first interview. The conversations continued over two sessions with three of the women, and I met with one of the women three times.

All of the women were happy to have participated in the study, and thanked me for providing them with the opportunity to share their experience. They felt that through their involvement in this project, they had gained a greater insight into themselves, a deeper understanding of their conflict with traditional religion, and a clearer sense of what spirituality had come to mean to them. Without exception, they felt that I had understood their experience and represented it in a way that was true to their experience.

### 3. The Process: Constructing Meaning

In this section I explain how I arrived at the themes which are presented in the next chapter; from transcribing the tapes, to choosing a procedure for working with the data and deciding on a form in which to present it, to the steps involved in applying this procedure.

**Transcribing the tapes:** It was first necessary to transcribe the tapes. I decided that I would do this personally for two reasons. It would help to ensure the confidentiality of the participants, and it would allow me to immerse myself more fully in the material. Though it was a tremendous amount of work, I am glad I made this decision. Through listening to the tapes, I gained a sensitivity to the flow of the dialogue, the pauses, the emphasis placed on certain words, the moments of laughter, and as much as was possible, made note of them in the

transcripts. I keyed the transcripts with a pseudonym and when they were completed, met with each of the women to go over the transcript to see if there were any concerns they had about being identified through the material. One of the women did feel that there were sections of the text that would reveal who she was. At her request I deleted these parts of the transcript. Two other women had concerns which were addressed by making several minor changes in the transcripts. I asked the women to choose a name by which they would like to be known in the published text, and from then on I used this name while working with the material.

**Choosing a procedure and format:** The next step involved deciding how to work with the transcripts to arrive at an understanding that would illuminate the question. I chose a procedure which I will describe in greater detail in the next section of this chapter. This procedure provided me with an overview of how to approach the material, and suggested a systematic way of working with the text that would help me to distinguish themes.

Working with the transcripts was a demanding task. I experienced first hand the challenges of "hermeneutic phenomenology" (Gelven, 1970, p. 34):

> Heidegger and other hermeneutic thinkers want to be true to both terms of their descriptive methodology: to let the facts speak for themselves; and at the same time to claim that there are no such things as uninterpreted facts – at least not in those cases where the hermeneutic method applies. Such a thing seems to consist, if not in a contradiction, at least in a dilemma (*Ibid*., pp. 34-35).

My intention was to be true to what the women had told me about their experience, in other words to "let the facts speak for themselves". At the same

time I was aware that my own sense of what was meaningful had a bearing on what stood out for me in the data, and on how I organized the material at each step of the process. In other words, "There are no 'uninterpreted' facts". This became particularly obvious to me as I observed the transformation in my own understanding over the two-year period during which I was engaged in this project. As my ideas and attitudes changed through the reading I was doing during this time, and through my own inner work on issues connected with my personal history with religious institutions and religious conditioning, my approach to the data also changed.

How was I to work with this dilemma? My first sense was that the best way to meet this challenge would be to include as much of the actual text of the conversations as possible in support of the themes that I constructed. I was also happy with this idea because after reading the transcripts over and over, the women's words had become very precious and meaningful to me. Much of the power of their stories lay in the language they had used to describe their experience. I wanted to give the women a chance to be heard in their own words, and I knew that this would also provide the reader with an opportunity to enter as directly as possible into the women's experience. It soon became clear that there were going to be two disadvantages to this approach. It was going to be incredibly time-consuming, and the final text of the themes would be very long. For these reasons, I decide to present the data primarily in tabular form. After some months spent trying to fit the data into this format, I concluded that I could not accept the limitations inherent in organizing the material in this way. I felt that I was erring on the hermeneutic side of the "hermeneutical -

phenomenological" dilemma. My own interpretations were coming through, but for the most part the women had been silenced. I wanted more of their stories, their experience to come through. At this point, in the interests, I thought, of brevity and conciseness, I took what ended up to be a second detour. I thought that I would briefly summarize the women's stories in my own words. I would then present this synopsis, followed by my verbal discourse on the themes that had emerged for me from working with the original text. After a number of months of work I remained dissatisfied with this plan. It lacked the vigour, the immediacy, and the richness that I enjoyed in the transcripts. And so, after a six month "short-cut", I returned to my original idea. I decided to let the women's own words form a chorus to each theme as it was presented. In this way, through their descriptions and my interpretations, both the women's voices and my own would be heard. Although these "detours" put me under time pressure, they were fruitful, and ultimately part of the hermeneutic process. Through experimenting with other ways of presenting the data I gained a deeper understanding of the text as a whole. It was engagement in the "hermeneutic circle". I moved from the transcripts, to an interpretation of the text which became modified when I again moved back into the transcripts, from which I emerged with a deeper understanding of the material, which was again altered when I returned to the text:

> . . . interpretation begins with fore-conceptions that are replaced by more suitable ones. This constant process of new projection is the movement of understanding and interpretation (Gadamer, 1986, p. 236).

This also took place as a movement within each individual transcript from part to whole and back again. I kept asking myself, as I read and re-read particular phrases and paragraphs, how they related to the overall question of women's conflict with traditional religion. And as I thought of this larger question, I was drawn back into the various particular concerns that were expressed at different moments during the conversations. It became clear that the whole could only be understood through reference to the parts, and the parts to the whole:

> Fundamentally, understanding is always a movement in this kind of circle, which is why the repeated return from the whole to the parts, and vice versa, is essential. Moreover, this cycle is constantly expanding, in that the concept of the whole is relative, and when it is placed in ever larger contexts the understanding of the individual element is always affected. . . . [This] takes account of the inner provisional and infinite nature of understanding . . . (*Ibid*., p. 167).

**Applying the procedure:** The procedure that I used to guide this movement from part to whole and whole to part was an adaptation of a method of protocol analysis recommended by Colaizzi (1978). As he stated, such adaptations are entirely acceptable:

> It must be emphasized that these research procedures of analysis that I employed should be viewed only as typical and are by no means definitive; furthermore, they usually develop with much overlapping among them, so that both the listed procedures and their sequences should be viewed flexibly and freely by each researcher, so that, depending upon his approach and his phenomenon, he can modify them in whatever ways seem appropriate (pp. 58-59).

I began by reading each transcript over and over again, to get an overall sense of the content, and to deepen my sensitivity to what was being

communicated by the women as they told their stories. Then I worked with each transcript individually, going over it line by line. Reflecting on the meaning of each paragraph or section of dialogue in light of the question being addressed by the transcript as a whole, I formulated this meaning in terms of a "significant statement". This process is illustrated through the following excerpts from my conversation with Miriam.

| Dialogue | Significant Statement |
|---|---|
| *M:* To be a woman in my religious tradition, meant to be subjected to the man. It was no clue, whatsoever, to give me a sense of my own identity. It was all, well, if he likes me, if he wants to marry me, I'm fine. If the employer wants to hire me, that must mean I'm okay. If my kids disobey, that means I'm wrong, it must be something I'm doing. Everything focused on, if it's not working in my life, it's my fault. Because I am somehow down here, and everybody else is up there, dictating, calling the shots in my life, making my choices for me. And God, probably, was it. So in other words, my gods were my husband, or society, or my religious tradition. Never a sense of myself in those years. It was always outer. God was always out there. Because of my religious training, God was in the external world. As a woman, for me, this stimulated enough pain, and distress, and discomfort, about something in my life; I could never in those years put a finger on what it was, | *As a woman, religion is an experience of subordination. She lacks a sense of identity.*<br><br>*Her identity is based on outer affirmation.*<br><br>*She is subordinate. Her life is determined by others.*<br><br>*Lack of identity.*<br>*God is outside of herself.*<br><br>*It is painful to feel that God is 'out there'; that she lacks control of her life; and that* |

but I started I would suspect intuitively feeling, this isn't the way it's supposed to be. There has to be more. So for me it stimulated the desire, somewhere I guess at a very deep subconscious level, to find another way. So if I were to say what stimulated my journey to my own spiritual identity, my sense of identity as a woman expressing life, then I would say the pain of all that, led me to that something inside me that said there is more, now just be willing to go through whatever it is to discover what that might be.

*she lacks a sense of herself.*

*Spirituality is a sense of her own identity as a woman.*

*Pain leads to an awareness that her life is not working, and then to her commitment to undergo whatever process is required to make her life meaningful.*

*I:* Could you describe that experience of pain a little more?

*M:* It was painful to know that though I was conforming according to what women were supposed to do, marriage, kids, creating a home, that didn't seem to do it; to say, I can't conceive of my life continuing in this direction. And I would even suspect a part of me, even though not consciously, was saying, well, what's going to happen when the kids grow up and leave home, or as it happened to me, what happens when your husband says, "I don't want to be here anymore"? The pain was feeling that I was smothered, or in this box of darkness, this box of dogma. There didn't seem to be a place to move out of. So that was the first start of the head thing yeah, this is the way your life is, you're boxed in, you're closed in, there's no place to go, but inside, that something saying you can open that box, you can really break out if you want to, so the pain was, in my own way, you know, I just became more obsessed with the outer

*Conformity to the traditional feminine role leaves her feeling unfulfilled.*

*She becomes aware of the insecurity of depending on the roles of wife and mother for her primary meaning in life.*

*Life is reduced to a "tight compartment". She lacks a sense of wholeness, openness.*

*She becomes aware of her potential to free herself.*

. . . That was the pain, for me as a woman, still thinking the man is the answer. Sex is the answer, or the lover, if you will just reassure me, that will be it. You see, for me the womanly thing was, that aspect, spiritually I know that we incorporate both feminine and masculine characteristics, and in that is the unity of God, which is not male or female, it's everything. But I was trained in such a way that I wouldn't experience that unity.

*Dependence on relationships with men, in order to feel that her life was meaningful, or she was worthwhile, was painful. Her conditioning led her to think that, as a woman, she was incomplete, spiritually, without a man.*

*I:* What were you experiencing as a result of the message that you were getting, as a result of the fact that you were a woman in the Jewish tradition? What was that experience like for you?

*M:* I'm sure that I had absolutely no sense of my own identity. I had not the foggiest clue of who I was, or what I was all about. I had never, just in the psychological, emotional sense, been given a sense of having any value, as a woman. I was never good enough. I never knew, it was like, what am I? I was always trying to look good, to give me that sense of being okay. I never had a sense of fun, frivolity. The sense I had was that life was a scary proposition, something to be feared. I had a fatalistic attitude. Just do the best you can. Live through the fear and the darkness.

*As a result of religious conditioning she lacks a sense of identity.*

*She has been invalidated by her tradition. She lacks self-worth and compensates by seeking outer affirmation.*

*Life is to be feared and endured.*

When I had gone through the complete transcript in this way I had a number of significant statements, which I then clustered together when they appeared to express a shared meaning. I then formulated this meaning in a few key words or

a brief descriptive phrase. Through this process themes were distinguished, and a thematic picture of the women's experience emerged. I have not included an example of an individual thematic picture here, because I feel that in the final form in which the themes appear in the next chapter, both the women's individual voices, as well as their shared voice, comes through.

While creating the thematic pictures for each of the women, I gradually began to notice similarities between the transcripts. When the five sets of themes and statements had been completed, I reviewed them as a whole, looking for both shared meanings as well as unique emphases or concerns. I also wrote a brief descriptive narrative summarizing each women's story to aid me in this process. Working with the combined thematic pictures, I began to see the individual transcripts in a different light. In some cases I went back to particular thematic pictures and changed the language I had used to describe certain themes. This change reflected my deeper understanding of each woman's experience which resulted from considering her story in the context of all five stories.

For months I immersed myself in the material. I read it, reflected upon it, read it again, keeping the question as a focus while I worked with the text. Through this process I came to construct the themes as they appear in Chapter Four. When I had completed them, I felt that they were inclusive in terms of the experience of all five women, and yet also took into consideration the uniqueness of each woman's experience. When I made the decision to present the themes along with excerpts from the conversations, I went back to the

transcripts and selected those quotes which seems most clearly to illustrate each theme.

Knowing that understanding is an ongoing process, and that therefore no form in which it is expressed can ever be final, it is reasonable to imagine that if I rewrote the themes a year from now they might be somewhat different than they are at present. However, for the purposes of this thesis, closure was necessary at some point. After meeting with each of the women to discuss the final draft of the results, which I presented to them as they appear in the next chapter, I was satisfied that I had reached this point of closure. I felt that in this form the themes convey most clearly the understanding I presently have about the experience of women's conflict with traditional religion, as the five women participating in this study described it to me. During the final meeting with each participant, I left a Post-Interview Questionnaire with them, requesting that they fill it out at their leisure and then return it to me. The Questionnaire and the responses to it are included as Appendix A to this thesis. In both the verbal and written feedback that I received from the women, they have assured me that in my interpretation I have been true to their experience. Without exception, each woman felt that I had brought forth her individual voice, while at the same time constructed a context in which the combined voices were expressed in a meaningful way. Overall, they were deeply pleased with, and enthusiastic about, the results. They felt that they had benefited a great deal from their participation in the project, and expressed to me their hopes that the same would be true for women facing similar challenges who read this thesis. I share this hope.

# 4. THE THEMES

> Whenever human relationships revolve around relations of power, where one person has the authority to tell the other the truth, where sloganeering, technical jargon, and rhetoric replace dialogue, our ontological vocation to transform ourselves is oppressed. I become a 'being for others', rather than a being for myself. I am the beneficiary of words which have no meaning for me: I hear them, but they cannot transform me. Even if I submit to them I am not liberated, only domesticated. My autonomy is obliterated in the face of the other who absorbs me. (Sellick, 1989, p. 191).

## A. Introduction

In this chapter women's experience of conflict with religious tradition is set out in four themes which were common to all participants. Though presented here as if they are clearly distinguishable from each other, in the conversations these themes were intimately interwoven. With a slight shift in emphasis one became transformed into the next. This is because they can be seen to describe one fundamental focus, the effect of religious conditioning on women's experience, in four contexts. I have named these *The intrapersonal realm: Being*; *The interpersonal realm: Relating*; *The transpersonal realm: Creating*; and *The realm of renewal: Transforming*.

A prominent focus in all of the dialogues was the women's perception of a marked difference between their experience of religious tradition and what they experienced spirituality to be. This essential distinction is subsumed under each of the themes through a contrast between two sub-themes as follows:

1. **The intrapersonal realm: Being**
   a) Self-alienation
      *Lack of identity*
      *Invalidation of self*
      *Destruction of integrity*
   b) Self-affirmation
      *Self-identity*
      *Self-worth*
      *Integration*

2. **The interpersonal realm: Relating**
   a) Subordination
      *Hierarchy, domination, and exploitation*
      *Abuse*
   b) Self-assertion
      *Needing a voice*
      *Finding a voice*

3. **The transpersonal realm: Creating**
   a) Determination by others
      *Submission*
      *Costs*
      *Dependency and disillusionment*
   b) Self-determination
      *Autonomy*
      *Beyond traditional systems: Declaring independence; creatively expressing self*

4. **The realm of renewal: Transforming**
   a) Religion as formalism
      *Blocks authentic relating*
      *Obstructs self-development*
      *Irrelevant concerns*
   b) Spirituality as process
      *Awareness*
      *Anger*
      *Crisis*
      *Supportive community*
      *God within*
      *Process as resolution*

The themes are disclosed through excerpts from the conversations. Where they are best revealed through the exchange of question and answer, brief sections of dialogue are included.

## B. The Themes

### 1. The intrapersonal realm: Being

This is the realm of the Self; of a person's most basic experience of their own existence and sense of their own self-worth and integrity. It has to do with our self-awareness: having an identity, valuing ourselves, knowing ourselves as integrated individuals. Fundamental to any of the other ways in which religious tradition affected the women in this study was the impact it had on their most intimate experience of themselves. Throughout the conversations, issues bearing on their sense of self kept recurring. They talked about this in terms of the absence or the presence of identity, self-worth, self-integration. The basic distinction to be made here is between religion as self-alienation and spirituality as self-affirmation.

#### a) Self-alienation

As the women described their experience of religious tradition, it was overwhelmingly an experience of self-alienation. The messages that they received from religion contributed to their not knowing themselves, not valuing themselves, and not feeling they were whole persons.

**Lack of identity:** the negative effect of religious tradition on the participants' identities ranged from feelings of being defined by someone or something else, to being 'invisible', to terrifying feelings of 'nothingness'. Miriam, describing

the kinds of conditioning she received from her religious tradition, talked about a lack of self-definition, the feeling that who she was depended on what others wanted her to be. She described the absence of a grounded sense of herself:

> There was no individuality. It was like everything was always based on something else. It was like you were who somebody else thought you should be. It was never a case of think for yourself, get in touch with your own feelings.

There was no emphasis on getting to know herself, on exploring who she was as an individual. She was to be and do "what society and my religion expected of me". As a woman, she was not expected to gain her own sense of self, but rather to lose herself in her husband and family. She was not to see herself through her own eyes, but through the eyes of others:

> To be a woman in my religious tradition meant to be subjected to the man. It was no clue, whatsoever, to give me a sense of my own identity. It was all, well, if he likes me, I'm fine... If my kids disobey, that means I'm wrong, it must be something I'm doing... Never a sense of myself in those years.

Everything was focused on the outer world, and she learned that God was definitely "out there". In her present career as a minister, she came to see the extent to which this alienates people from themselves:

> The greatest challenge that I experience in working with the people I work with, and it's not always something that they are consciously aware of, is the grasp that those old messages about God have on them. They deny the spiritual centre of their being, that God is within them. The name God is simply a word that is given to something you really can't describe anyway. And there are other names, if you so choose. The first God that we are introduced to has a powerful hold on us.

Kayde also experienced that her religious tradition did not provide a context in which she could come to know herself as a person. She felt invisible, like a non-entity. The lack of validation she received from the Church because she was a woman, its indifference to or denial of her spirituality, made her feel both angry and afraid:

> And the anger being at . . . first of all, knowing that there is something way down inside that is very special, whatever name you want to give it, it's spiritual, my spiritual self. All those years knowing that there was something fantastic inside that wasn't being acknowledged . . .

It was not simply the Church's failure to support her sense of who she was that bothered Kayde. She felt that the Church actually interfered with it -- made it difficult to be in touch with herself:

> The Church gets in the way of that sense of spirituality. The Church is very narrow. I can't be who I am in the Church. I can go in there and behave myself, but I can't be myself. I'm aware right now of checking myself out to see if I am projecting, because as I get older ... and maybe I'm not ... maybe it's just a spiral thing, becoming aware that I wasn't ready for certain learnings and now I'm becoming more open to things. That I can't blame the Church. I'm *going* to blame the Church, but I have to be careful. But the Church has to take responsibility for its crap!

It concerned her that the Church not only did not promote the work of personal development but, as she perceived it, actually discouraged people from a type of exploration which would lead to self-knowledge:

> The Church doesn't recognize the work of personal growth, and teaching people to do their own inner work is not honoured and recognized. It is not validated. It smacks of good mental health... So: not honouring that part of living, that spiritual part where sin is alienation from self, not knowing self, not honouring self. The

> Church doesn't foster a person's sense of identity, it discourages you from looking at it.

Jen was also concerned about the way in which religion comes to obstruct spirituality. Through promoting itself as the true path to spiritual life, traditional religion sets up a situation where people all too readily confuse the symbolic with the real, membership in a religious organization with life lived in communion with spirit. Jen spoke about the way in which this occurred in her own life, and its impact on her sense of identity:

> For a while we can believe in the Church. It symbolizes what spirituality is. But it is only a symbol. And sometimes the symbol can be an obstacle to really experiencing what spirituality is. So that helped me to see that, for me, I was more spiritual by leaving. I was really following my vocation. But I really struggled for a while. I felt that I was damning myself. (Laughter) It wasn't funny then, though. You see, by leaving the Church, I felt that I was leaving spiritual life completely. I had identified my own experience with the religious vocation I had adopted as mine. So now what was my spirituality? I had nothing left. If I wasn't that, what was I? It was confusing, extremely confusing.

In our conversations, Jen gave examples of positive changes in her self-image and relationship with herself since she no longer belonged to a religious organization. The following dialogue reveals how she experienced herself before leaving the Church. I had commented on her developing sense of herself:

> At last! And I guess that is where the regret is, that I did that so late. Well, my sense of self has changed. I can't say that I didn't have a sense of self, but it has drastically changed.

*I: Okay, so what is the difference, before and after?*

> Before, I was nothing.

*I: That's quite the sense of self!*

The confusion between symbol and reality, between words and what they point to, was also an issue for Pat, and she felt that the way religion is presented by the Church was partly responsible for this confusion:

> I felt very threatened in Sunday school, I didn't feel safe or comfortable at all. It was a competition. You were thrown questions about God, it was a pressure for me, and if you didn't get things right, then you were made to feel stupid. To be learning about God shouldn't be a pressure, it should be natural, and my spirituality is a natural thing.

She spoke of how this affected her sense of herself as a spiritual person:

> My sense of spirituality didn't come from the Bible, it didn't come from catechism, it did not come from reading. We would expect that that is where we would find it, from church and religion, but there was nothing there. I think that it damaged me more than anything, because I was thinking it wasn't the inside stuff that I had, it was an intellectual thing. When you pick up a Bible and read, and I didn't consider myself then and I was trying to live up to, and I didn't consider myself to have any wonderful intellect at all. It took me a long time to realize that I have a lot of stuff to give and I intend to give it. It begins from the time we are born and it has nothing to do with religion; through your religion you lose touch with that. You get to suppose that it comes from words.

The effect of religious conditioning on Pat was that, like Jen, she felt that she was nothing, that she had no self. For Pat, lacking a sense of her identity was a terrifying experience. She described her feelings of alienation as a result of identifying spirituality with religious tradition:

> I wasn't aware of the fact that I had any spirituality, you see. Because I related spirituality definitely to God, and the Bible, and the Church, and all of those things. It was very lonely. I was afraid, terribly afraid, terrified, to the point that I was terrified to

> show anything other than a physical being, and I mean just physical being, without any characteristics of any sort, just a body that functions, not any thoughts, or feelings, or anything, just shut down, cold, alone totally, no matter there could be people around you, but you're always alone.

All of the women spoke, in one way or another, of feeling insecure about their basic sense of self, of lacking a sense of their own presence due to the influence of religious tradition. Monique felt that she had to choose between being true to herself or participating in her religious community. Wanting to belong to the community, she allowed her sense of herself to become absorbed in her faith:

> I was hiding a lot of myself, because I wanted to belong to my church and to my community. So a lot of things that I would think . . . and I could see that I didn't see it the same way they saw, but I wouldn't say it. And now [after she left the Church] I could allow myself to be myself. I didn't need to hide anymore, from them, because I had left them.

She revealed the extent to which she lacked her own identity while describing how she felt after leaving:

> Now I feel so good that I am not a *slave* to this. That my personal identity is not linked to something outside of me anymore. I think that my religion became *me*. It *took* all of my life. It was its meaning, and that's how, for so long, I rationalized that religion was good. It gave meaning to a person's life. But it was an exterior meaning, it didn't carry me through. Then when I let it all go, I realized that even without that meaning, it wasn't the end of my life. There were other very worthwhile . . . (pause) . . . myself, to start off. I didn't need an exterior meaning.

**Invalidation of self:** All of the participants felt that as they essentially were, they were not acceptable to their religious tradition. This invalidation was then

accompanied by negative self-evaluations. Feeling that in the eyes of the Church they were not good enough led to a lack of self-worth. The messages that they got about themselves were that, as women, they were innately and intrinsically sinful, by birth and in essence. They felt that their religious traditions disapproved of emotionality and sexuality, while identifying women with both. Pat felt immoral, ungodly, through being caught in the conflicting demands religion placed on women:

> I didn't understand what they were saying, and I didn't live up to what they were telling me I was supposed to do . . . If you are a good person, if you are basically a good human being, and you are one of God's children, as such, then you had to follow church rules. You weren't allowed to be emotional, you weren't allowed to have sexual feelings, you weren't allowed any of those things because they weren't good. We were to have children, but how were you supposed to have children if you weren't allowed to feel real and to have sexual relationships, and so far as I was concerned I was always a bad person.

Global feelings of being disconfirmed, without value, and untrustworthy were shared by all participants. Miriam had never felt any confirmation by her tradition of her human worth, and had the sense that no matter what she did she would never measure up:

> I had never, just in the psychological, emotional sense, been given any sense of value as a woman. I was never good enough. I never knew, it was like, what am I? I was always trying to look good, to give me that sense of being okay. I never had a sense of fun, frivolity. The sense I had was that life was a scary proposition, something to be feared. I had a fatalistic attitude. Just do the best you can. Live through the fear and the darkness.

She wanted to feel accepted and acceptable, but in spite of her efforts was unable to gain a positive sense of herself: "God was some thing, or some one, to

fix what was wrong, and there was so much wrong, that I guess I didn't know where to begin to start asking God to fix it. So there was never a feeling that 'I'm okay'".

Monique also felt that she was never going to be good enough, that she was expected to live up to an ideal that could never be achieved:

> I did not want to acknowledge that I sinned, the way they presented it to us. So I went to confession, but I always felt that I wasn't completely honest, because I wasn't supposed to be like that. I was supposed to be perfect.

The contrast between the ideal image of who she should be and her sense of who she was resulted in feelings of guilt and inferiority:

> I felt so, I don't know what it was . . . guilt, or . . . not worthy, you know. . . I just felt so *guilty* all of the time . . . So, for me, religion carried a lot of guilt. That's too bad, though, but that's what it was for me.

A key issue for Jen in her conflict with religious tradition, the one which caused her the greatest suffering, was that she had learned not to trust herself. She described a sense of being deeply flawed, intrinsically sinful, which she received from religious conditioning. Jen had worked through much of the pain around this issue and at the time of the interview was able to find humour in it. The word 'before' refers to the time prior to her leaving the Church:

> Before, I would stop myself from doing anything because I didn't allow myself to do anything, because anything I did would be poisoned, because *I* was poisoned.

*I: From birth?*

Yes.

*I: Original sin.*

> Yes. So everything is corrupted. Like there's that worm in the apple. (Laughter)

*I: So, Eve not only picked an apple, she picked one with a worm in it.* (Laughter)

> How can I trust myself? I'm not trustable . . . You can see the difference from not trusting myself to trusting myself, seeing myself as incapable of making anything good, to seeing myself as capable.

What she learned from her religious training about who she was had a devastating impact on her sense of self-worth. She tried to live according to the rules and regulations of her religious tradition, but this only added to her sense of self-doubt because she continued to get the following negative message:

> That I was a sinner, that I had to work really hard to prove myself, and even then, I wasn't much. And that I always had to question my actions, question my intentions, because they could be wrong. There was always this idea of being wrong, or being not right.

For Kayde also, the lack of validation she experienced in the Church was intensely painful. She felt very wounded by being rendered invisible, by seeing that "women don't count", and by the lack of response shown by her Church when she attempted to share who she was as a person and a woman: "It's the silence, it's the indifference. It's not being acknowledged, not being heard". Kayde felt that her pain was connected to the suffering of many other women, that women shared a common wound, the lack of acknowledgement of their spiritual potential:

> I have really been in touch with almost a fathomless depth . . . it's been around the tears, that really don't connect anywhere. It just

> goes on and on forever and ever. And I have been aware of it in other women I have spoken with. And it just wells up from my toes, and millions of miles beneath. Women's pain, of being so full of wonderful abilities, potential, their spiritual self, whatever, and it's squelched. And not nurtured. And not allowed to flow. I'm talking about women's experiences. Being devalued, second-rate; being made to feel worthless, and invisible.

Along with the pain, Kayde felt anger and fear. She was angry that the sense she had of her own spirituality, as a woman, was not validated by her tradition, nor was there any adequate provision for its expression. This feeling intensified when she read literature critiquing the Church's oppression of women throughout the ages:

> And then discovering *why* it hasn't been validated, and going through the history, and being really angry at the Church for not nurturing that, or as I am discovering, not even *knowing* what that is.

Kayde met with indifference when she initially tried to communicate with other members of her church. She still desired to share with them her sense of what spirituality was about, but feared the rejection she anticipated:

> You know, I've had this feeling before, and if I really let everything up out of me, it will not be validated, that I will in fact -- well, being laughed at, or being scolded, or being treated indifferently. It just feels like a death. Not wanting to let a death to happen.

The assumptions that traditional religion has about women were also distressing to Kayde: that women are "bad and sinful and many other things. That it's okay to beat them up, and it's okay for violence in the family, and it's okay for all this sexual abuse to go on".

**Destruction of integrity:** Being invalidated and disparaged led the women, to various extents, to dissociate from parts of themselves. Sexuality, feelings, and spontaneous behaviour were suppressed. The ranked dualisms between mind and body, thinking and feeling, spirituality and sexuality which traditional religion propagates were very destructive to the women's sense of wholeness. For some, the duality was experienced primarily as a split between mind and feelings; for others as a conflict between instinctual physical desires and spiritual aspirations. Several women described a global sense of separation between who they felt they were and who they thought the Church wanted them to be. Others spoke of an encompassing feeling of being stifled, smothered, and shut down almost to the point of annihilation, or of being almost irreparably split apart.

Kayde, in order to deal with demands of a family and a religious institution that alienated her from herself, coped by creating two selves, one public, the other separate, private:

> In my own therapy I came to see just how separated I was; that I lived two lives, really. I lived within the rules and regulations of my family life and of the Church, but from a very early age I lived another life. I don't know how I can say this... I took the freedom to go off and be myself and I came back and lived within this little book of rules where there was no sense of myself, of who I was.

Pat, like Kayde, felt torn between who she was and who she was allowed to be. She had looked to religion for guidance in becoming her authentic, integrated self, but instead discovered how destructive its rules and roles were to women's development of a sense of wholeness:

> These "supposed to's" were supposed to make me feel like a real, whole person, but they didn't. They just made me turn away,

> because I didn't feel like a real, whole person. I think that the role that the Church gave women, society gives women, ruins women. It tears us apart. We are not doing what we are supposed to. We are not looking the way we are supposed to, we are not feeling the way we are supposed to, and if we do feel real, we are not supposed to show our real feelings.

Pat was personally wounded by this process of invalidation of women's selves to the point that she felt dismembered, and lost her will to live:

> I've seen women with a lot of beauty, but boy, they are just stifling it; they are just going down and down to where I was, not wanting to exist at all for any reason, not even for my daughter. But I had been torn apart.

Miriam experienced that social and religious conditioning reduced life to a "tight compartment", a "box of darkness, a box of dogma". While she felt smothered, she was able to retain a sense of her ability to free herself:

> There didn't seem in my world to be a place to move out of . . . you're boxed in, you're closed in, there's no place to go, but inside, that something saying you can open that box, you can really break out if you want to.

The duality that figured significantly in Monique's life was the one between head and heart, thought and feeling. While being aware that a number of factors contributed to the split between what she was thinking and what she was feeling, Monique held the Church accountable for its part in sanctioning the bias against attending to the inner world of feelings:

> What religion did for me, I feel it separated my intellect, my mind, from my feelings. I wasn't listening to my feelings . . . deep down I wasn't in touch with the feelings I was having. And I don't think it's all religion that has to be blamed, but it kept it going.

Later, she describes this further:

> I had lived in my mind. I realized I hadn't been in touch with my feelings, because I wasn't allowed to be myself, so how could I listen to my own feelings.

As part of her religious training she read Dr. Norman Vincent Peale. She was encouraged to apply positive thinking to overcome the anxiety and depression she was feeling, without being advised to learn what she could from her feelings, to discover what they could tell her about the changes that she needed in her life. She discovered that this "mind over feeling" approach, rather than being healing, led her to dissociate from her feelings:

> I was very angry at all this positive thinking . . . because I felt it had not helped me solve my problems. It had only put it on hold, or given it temporary comfort. It didn't deal with the problems . . . I feel it had been false.

The self-alienation she felt made her even more vulnerable to religious conditioning:

> Religion disconnected me, in my experience, and trapped me, and made me a victim, and I was controlled, blind. Right now, I don't see too many benefits to having that kind of spirituality.

Kayde also commented on the destructive effect of the Church's tendency to condemn so-called "negative" feelings: "I know people who were going crazy because they were being told it was a sin to be depressed, and yet they were depressed".

Religious teachings that suggested sex is evil and fundamentally opposed to spirituality were the source of Jen's most intense struggle with herself. Wanting to live up to the religious ideals of goodness and purity, which are coupled in the

Christian tradition with a denunciation of sexuality, she felt sinful and guilty when she had sexual feelings and so tried to repress and destroy them:

> I would confess a lot of my fantasies. I did not think they were too pure. I had a lot of guilt attached to sexuality . . . I felt that I was a sinner, and that I had to fight myself all of the time.

*I: You wasted a lot of energy rejecting yourself*

> Really painfully attacking myself.

*I: So you got the sense that it was wrong and bad, sexual feelings. What about women who were lay people?*

> Well if they were married it was okay, they had a function. For the Church, even today, sexuality is only for reproduction.

Jen commented specifically on the spirit/body split that is such a focus in religious teachings, and on the conflict that this generates:

> In the Church there is too much of a 'disembodied' bias, so you have to really be on guard all the time against impulses, against desires. There is always this kind of struggle that is necessary. You are always fighting your physical self, your instinctive self, your sexual self, so there really is no room for spontaneity in the Church. You have to be careful, to be really on guard all the time.

Religion gave her the message that it was particularly important for women to be on guard. What she learned was that traditional religion condemns sex and teaches us to fear it. At the same time, it associates sexuality with women. Sexuality is bad, and women are responsible for it, so if men desire women, women are to be blamed. Women become both desired and feared, and are then held accountable for men's desire and men's fear. In order to be religious, Jen felt that she had to deny her bodily sense of herself as a woman, and to take responsibility for how men might relate to her:

> Before was that, I was afraid of what my femininity could be, like I was afraid of it, like that spelled danger to be a woman, for a man. I had to really watch all the time how I acted, that I could be a temptress, that I could be a prostitute, that I could be ... sexuality was wrong, was bad. And that reflected on me as a woman.

Kayde saw religion's fear of sexuality as "a fear of what women represent. And that is birthing, that is between the legs, that is sexuality, that is spiritual". She commented on the tragic effects of this fear: "It is not allowed from the neck down in the education of clergy. And that's where you are running into the tragedies with clergy, the sexual perversion".

For the women in this study, religious teachings were in one form or another destructive to their sense of integrity and wholeness as persons. To be religious was to be in conflict with themselves, and they resolved the conflict by denying and repressing those aspects of themselves which fell on the 'wrong' side of the hierarchical dualisms endemic to traditional religion. In their experience religion promoted, not the integration of differing aspects of themselves or the healthy resolution of inner conflict, but the domination of one part by another. For these women, traditional religion did not guide them to self-knowledge, self-acceptance and inner wholeness. Rather than leading to the overcoming of self-alienation, religious tradition produced it.

**b) Self-affirmation**

In the course of our conversations, as the women described what spirituality was for them, they made frequent references to a positive sense of themselves, a confident sense of their own presence and of their intrinsic value as a self. Several of the women spoke of a greater sense of integration, of feeling like

whole persons. The written word cannot adequately communicate the importance of this experience for all the women who participated in this study. It cannot convey the joy, the energy, and the relief I heard in their voices as they talked of this. Statements affirming themselves were often coupled with ones attributing their prior lack of self-awareness to their involvement in traditional religion. Self-affirmation is considered here under the topics of identity, self-worth, and integration.

**Self-identity:** All participants described spirituality as gaining an awareness of their own identity. This occurred for Monique when she withdrew from religion and her role as a sister, and no longer depended upon a faith relationship to the Christian Father God and the personality of Jesus Christ to substitute for a sense of her own identity. She felt that focusing on God and Spirit as 'out there' had delayed her own self-development. She described what she had been taught spirituality was by her religious tradition:

> That it was a relationship with God, and with the dogma of the Church. Trying to discover who God was, through Jesus Christ. And now, to me, I wonder. I just feel that it was a waste of time, there was no meaning in it. When I lived it, I had what I thought was spiritual experiences, but what they were, I don't know what they were, now. It wasn't my own personal growth, as a person.

When she questioned her faith, greater attunement with herself became possible:

> It's my break from the faith that I was living that helped me get in touch with myself . . . That's probably when I started seeing . . . trying to look at who I was, really. If I wasn't all that, I was just . . . I had just been . . . Now it looked as if religion was just a blanket over who I really was . . . something superficial, and I could live without it.

As Monique spoke about what spirituality has come to mean to her, she phrased it as being in touch with herself, listening to and communicating with herself:

> I am more in touch with myself, and I think that's . . . spiritual life now has come to mean to be in touch with who I am, at this point.

Also:

> I think that spirituality is communicating with yourself. But you have to be careful that it's not just intellectualization. Spirituality means more than that. I remember discussions in the convent about that. (Soft laughter) That men's spirituality wasn't very good, because it was too intellectual. We women were better at it because we were more in touch with our feelings. I don't know. (Soft laughter)

And:

> So that really made the link for me, that the Spirit I was really needing to listen to was, basically, myself.

The joy that Monique felt when she first began to get a sense of her own unique identity was proclaimed in the following statements:

> There was a feeling of liberation, and I felt truly . . . I used the word that I knew. I felt that this was *heaven*, because I was free from the Church telling me who I had to be. I didn't have to be what other people thought I had to be.

At the time of the interviews, Monique still felt a great deal of pain and anger about the restrictive effect religious training had on her development of a mature identity. Now, however, rather than shutting off her feelings or adopting a superficial veneer of positivity, she was willing to go into the pain and conflict,

listen to her own needs, and continue to take the steps she felt were necessary for her own healing.

When Jen left her religious tradition she also felt emancipated, and wanted to tell others, "Hey, I've got good news for you, you can be *free!*" For many years while in her religious order, Jen had lacked an authentic sense of herself. Her religious role had substituted for the development and expression of her own unique being. Initially she thought that this role would allow her to have more of a self, a more productive place in society, a greater influence on others. Eventually she came to appreciate the value of allowing her own identity to emerge, being simply who she is, independent of any role:

> Maybe I had more of a role, a visible role in the world. But it was outside of me. It wasn't coming from within me . . . Now I see that it is better to be influenced from within than to have it, you know, from an outside shell . . . There is a place for outside roles . . . but if there isn't at the same time the sense of self, it can be very draining and very unreal and very alienating because then I am not enough in it. It's not being real.

Jen felt that there was a radical change in her identity as a consequence of rejecting religious conditioning that had for many years structured her self-perception:

> It's given me a better sense of myself, a fuller sense of myself. I'm feeling more confident in whatever I do. It's me, and I become more accepting of who I am, and it's made a whole lot of difference. I am a completely different person than when I was a sister, and a lot of my brothers and sisters have told me that. I lost the assertive part of myself, the expressive part. I am really more able to be myself. I even stopped being who, accepting who, like I'd always be like an observer, like anything I did I would censor it, always censoring myself. I'm more spontaneous, and being

> whatever, and making mistakes, and it's okay, but before I couldn't do that.

For Jen, spirituality has come to mean, in part, accepting her humanity rather than attempting to reach an idealized, unattainable state of perfection which denies it. This acceptance frees her to experience an authentic sense of self.

Being more connected with herself, feeling an increasing harmony with herself is how Kayde described her growing sense of spirituality. Though she had always thought of God as being within as well as without, God within used to be associated with masculine imagery and feelings of fear of male power. As she developed a stronger sense of her own spirituality she no longer experienced God within in terms of imagery, masculine or feminine. Rather, God within is experienced as inner attunement with herself, an awareness of being in inner stillness. When she thinks of God as being "out there", she now uses feminine imagery:

*I: Was there a time when you thought God was a man?*

> Oh, sure, when I was younger. And I still have that little vestige left.

*I: How did your idea of God change from a male figure?*

> It changed in the milieu of having done all this reading, and coming to grips with "You know, I was right in my thinking about these spiritual things being important; women really are important . . . But I think what's beginning to change, not that God is a woman, but being in touch with *me*, and it's my comfort zone now, and when I get into a crisis, and I can get into that still place. It's inside now.

*I: What about when you thought of God as a male figure?*

> Then, it was within myself, but it was an image of a man, and it was still a *fear* of the power of a man -- getting *permission* from. Whereas now it's inside and out and around me, the experience I have. It's me in conversation with *myself*; and if I have to put it out there, it's the image of a woman.

Gaining more security in her own identity, she is less fearful that religious conditioning will result in self-alienation:

> I need to be open to hearing the stuff that I have heard all these years with different ears. And maybe I can do that now because I feel a little more secure about myself -- I feel like, "Alright, now that I really know who I am, there aren't many of you in this church that are going to destroy me. You can say anything to me and I can come in, and sit in your midst, and listen to your stuff, and I can say 'I wonder if this guy really believes what he's saying?'"

Pat spoke of spirituality as inner experience of authentic being, as well. Not only did she think of it as an acceptance and affirmation of her inner self, she felt very strongly that spirituality was innate. In our conversations she emphasized many times that spirituality was a "gift from God" that had been given to everyone from birth, that we are innately spiritual, that spirituality is 'natural', but that we don't recognize this because of the religious beliefs we are introduced to by our families and society as a whole. As Pat described a scene with her daughter to illustrate what she meant, it became clearer to me that for Pat, spirituality is the innocent, unselfconscious expression of oneself:

> Even today, I can remember going down East on a bit of a trip with my husband and daughter, and my daughter at the time was two years old. We were in a field camping . . . She went over to a rock in the field, stood on the rock, and she was standing on the rock, making her hands go, and she was talking, and I thought, look at

> this little preacher, you know. It was just a natural thing for her to be standing on this rock, expressing her feelings and expressing herself, and there was nobody with her, we were a matter of you know probably 800 yards or more away from her . . . I thought it was really wonderful, and I really enjoyed it, and I just kind of took it in, and then she started singing, and it was just beautiful, it felt really neat, but I didn't think any more of it at the time. Now that I am getting in touch with my own spirituality, it's like that was spirituality for her . . . She was a free spirit. She didn't care who was around. She was not threatened by anyone or anything. It was like she was safe, standing on this rock, and it was beautiful . . . It was there, at two years old. As of today, I still haven't taken my daughter to church.

Describing spirituality as a confident sense of herself, Pat also touched on what it is that causes us to lose our awareness of it: seeking affirmation primarily from outside ourselves, and letting others determine our behaviour because of our desire to please them:

> *I: What is the actual experience of this spirituality for you? What are you living?*
>
> I'm a free spirit. That's what I feel. I'm not living for the outside. I'm not living anymore to live up to other people's expectation, or to do what people say I should do, or shouldn't do, or anything at all. I've accepted me, and I love me for what I am, and for what I can do. And I guess it's always been there, but I was looking outside of that for other, I suppose affirmation, or people telling me that it was okay for me to be the way I am, to feel the way I feel, and freedom. It's a freedom. My spirit is free and no one has control of it outside of me. I'm responsible.

The connection between spirituality and development of a sense of self, which was missing from the teachings of her traditional religion, came to be of essential importance to Miriam. Discovering that she was innately valuable, with inner resources she could learn to access was, in fact, necessary for her

survival. She was introduced to this new perspective through an alternative spiritual organization:

> The first message I heard when I went to the church I am involved in [non-traditional, non-denominational] is that "You are important, you count, you have some incredible gifts to give to life, you have untapped strength within you, and the key is, you have to open the door to yourself". This is what I had been waiting to hear, in that as much as I had never experienced my own sense of identity, it was what I had always wanted. It was even more desperate than that. It was what I needed, to live, probably, otherwise I wouldn't be able to live, if I thought my whole life had to be predicated upon somebody out there, being, you know, a power in my life, either giving to me, or taking away from me.

The development of a sense of spirituality, of a relationship with God, was intimately linked for Miriam with the development of her own identity. They were inseparable, a co-occurrence. Knowing God was not possible without knowing herself. Illumination of her own heart and mind was required:

> My whole connection to God subsequently was a conscious experience, of me having to say, okay, do you believe in God, and if you do, where is it, how is it, why is it? And that's where my sense of identity came from, it was like, well, if God is good, and God is love, and I remember hearing that, even though life didn't seem to reflect it too much, why would it be somewhere out there? I have to connect with it. And I knew the only way to do that was through my own mind and heart, ultimately.

**Self-worth:** For all of the women, spirituality was associated with a healthy sense of their own value. They spoke about accepting themselves, caring for and nurturing themselves, and recognizing and celebrating their potential. Jen was relieved that she could validate herself, that she could let herself enjoy a feeling of pride in her accomplishments. This was in marked contrast to what she had been conditioned by religion to feel about previous achievements:

> Well, I'm sure finally finding that I have a lot of potential, and that I can *act* on it. Like I'm feeling good about doing that. But before, even if I could see that I had potential, it was always to be hidden, otherwise it would be being proud, and there wasn't much value in it, anyways. It all came from God, and it had to return to Him, and I was just an instrument, and a row to be . . . I just had to be this empty, this empty pipe. (Laughter) What a way to be, huh?

Monique had been a responsible, creative worker for the Church, demonstrating initiative and leadership. She had received no acknowledgement for these qualities, and in fact had been told she lacked them. When she left the Church she was able to give herself credit for the contribution she had made, and began to recognize her strength of character. She no longer felt unworthy and inadequate:

> I feel freer. I don't have all this guilt that I am carrying around. I don't feel guilty, anymore, for who I am.

For Pat, self-acceptance and the awareness of her spirituality arose together. Through the decision to accept herself it became possible for her to open to and affirm her inner self, to acknowledge her spirituality:

> It's a feeling of being accepted, of accepting myself, it's a spiritual feeling, and that's something I never felt from my religious training or my church, accepting myself.

Through accepting herself she felt empowered: "I felt wonderful. . . I could do what I needed to do, and wanted, and feel good about it". She also found that this set in motion a process of emotional healing, allowing for the resolution of some painful experiences from the past:

> Now that I have gotten in touch with my spirituality, and feeling wonderful about who I am, and that I am a worthy person and all

> the rest, some of that stuff is just falling in place for me, it's just happening.

Kayde affirmed herself in the following way: "All of this good stuff in myself is emerging. It's very legitimate, very strong energy, very spiritual". In her conflicts with the Church Kayde had always been made to feel in the wrong: she was the one who was bad, or who didn't understand, or who didn't express herself appropriately. As she began to gain a sense of her own value, to feel that she was a worthy person with a positive contribution to make to the Church, Kayde began to see herself in relationship to the Church in a new light:

> I would say I was the one standing on two legs, filling up with fresh clean air, and the Church was the one down on its knees, who couldn't walk, but was telling me how to do it. And I'm not having any of that! (Laughter)

The importance of self-affirmation was a basic teaching of the alternative spiritual approach that Miriam became involved in. She was inspired and empowered by it:

> In this church, the very first message was, if you want that [spirituality] to be, then you somehow have to realize that within yourself. Wow! Where do I begin? That's why so much of the teaching is based on the most simplistic, love yourself; appreciate yourself; develop a sense of your own value and worthiness; esteem yourself.

**Integration:** The women touched on the topic of integration in a variety of ways: some through direct statements about wholeness and the inclusion of repressed aspects of themselves, others by speaking of the fragmentation they had felt, and how that was beginning to change. There was a time of despair during Monique's conflict with her religious tradition when she felt her life had

completely fallen to pieces: "At one point, I saw my life like a sheet of glass, all shattered, and I didn't know where to start, it was all broken". Monique is now engaged in a gradual process of healing through allowing herself to approach these issues and then withdraw from them again when she needs to distance herself. This is helping her to accept more of her past experiences, and to resolve them.

In the past, Kayde's sense of self and her personal development had been dissociated as a result of her experiences in her family and with religious training. Integration for her was bringing more of herself into all her experiences. Speaking about self-development before and after gaining a sense of her own spirituality, she said:

> I did [grow], but it was in spite of that [religious conditioning]. It was that dissociated thing again. I keep coming back to that. Now it's not dissociated. If it ever dissociates now, it's usually when I am really upset, and I have to talk myself down, but that doesn't happen as much anymore.

Jen described the positive feelings she experienced as she began to integrate parts of herself that had been denied. Accepting her sexuality, she feels more alive, more energetic:

> Then I was more alive! . . . I had more energy. I was discovering a whole other dimension of myself, so I wasn't as frustrated, having to fight against myself. So energy was released within me. But also a certain fear, too, like, where is this going to go? And I don't know where it's going to go. But still the feeling that it's okay is very strong. It's given me peace, in a sense, and just even thinking that I don't necessarily have to be active sexually but to see myself as a sexual human being whatever I do has broadened my way of looking at myself, like I'm not fighting against part of myself, I have integrated more of who I am.

The process of integration came to be valued by Jen as an ongoing adventure of self-discovery:

> It's been a learning experience to accept all the parts of me as valid. And there is still more parts to be discovered. And yes, I am rediscovering a lot of my sexual, and feminine, and yes, spiritual parts of me in a different light, seeing them in a broader context, and not in a narrow context.

Feelings of wholeness and abiding presence were the ways in which Pat described the integration that occurred when she got in touch with her inner self during a weekend personal growth workshop:

> It was a wonderful experience to a point; it was a very scary, very frightening experience, but that's when I really got in touch with my spirituality, and I realized that weekend that it wasn't God who abandoned me, but I abandoned Him, because of the abuse that had happened in my family, and the messages that I was getting from my church, and that was not God, that was not spirituality, it was not the beauty that people need to have, or that I felt people need to have. I came away from that workshop scared, but feeling very whole, for the first time in my life, and I still have stuff to work on but I felt whole and for the first time in my life felt that I'll never be alone again, even when I'm alone in physical being I'm not alone and I know that.

Miriam spoke of integration in the most inclusive terms, as a way of opening to experience without separating it into opposing dualisms. This, she felt, was the key to her own healing; the vision that gave her the strength to make peace with her past, the commitment that enabled her to enter fully into life. Because her statements about integration sum up so beautifully the process of transformation that is the spiritual journey as the women in this study

experienced it, I have included them at the end of *The realm of renewal: Transforming.*

The distinction between religion and spirituality with respect to *The intrapersonal realm: Being*, is cogently summed up by Pat. Although the self-alienation that resulted from religious conditioning was the key issue for Pat in her conflict with traditional religion, her words express an experience held in common and deeply felt by *all* the women who participated in this study: traditional religion makes it very difficult for women to become aware of their innate spirituality, to realize the truth that they are "made in the image of God". For these women it is in spite of religious conditioning, and through active struggle to overcome the effects of religious conditioning, that they become able to affirm themselves and to experience the presence of the divine within themselves and within their lives:

> *I: Where does the Church come in, what place does it have regarding spirituality?*
>
> I feel like laughing about it in a sense, because as far as I am concerned, there are a whole lot of other places I could go to, and feel a whole lot better than going to church; that I don't have to go there to be spiritual. Those religious beliefs that I had from the Bible and the Church, etc., etc., that is not the spirituality that I feel. And it's more damaging than good for me.
>
> *I: How so?*
>
> There has to be spirituality before you can have religion, and that isn't what I see with the religion I was taught. If everybody in the Church has religion, and no spirituality, it's not going to be a support for my own spirituality. It's going to be taking away from my spirituality.

*I: How?*

> I'm going to be judged. If I don't act the way they think I should, they won't accept me. I won't be part of it. So there are rules and regulations, very severe rules and regulations. And we are people, we are real, and we have feelings, and we have all kinds of things, and in order to keep my spirituality I have to, when I walk into a church, don't allow any of those judgments to take that away from me. That seems to be the problem, is that if you don't have spirituality, but you have religion as it was taught to you, you have these expectations of people that come between you, and you don't accept them, and can't relate to them. They think you're crazy.

Pat continued:

> I could go to church, but it's an expectation of someone out there. It partly removes me from God; it goes through other people before it gets to me. I was born with a gift, and I either used it or didn't. And the reason I didn't use my gift, was because of the outside, because of the religious aspects. Religion was the substitute. It's part of the reason I wasn't aware of my own spirituality. It gets twisted and turned with the religious beliefs of others. When I got in touch with my own inner self . . . then the spirituality was there. I relate it to love. A love that nobody can explain. I felt loved. I felt really loved. And there was nobody there. That I myself could even love myself, at that point. And I allowed myself. It felt good and it was inside, and it was just so good and whole. My inner self was allowed to live after all those years. There was an inner peace with myself. It didn't last long, at first. But I keep letting go, and it keeps coming back. Now I feel like I'm a whole person.

**2. The interpersonal realm: Relating**

This is the realm of relationship; of a person's experience of interaction with others, and sense of where they 'fit' with others. It has to do with the quality of our 'being with' others; whether we are valued as participants in our families, communities, and social and cultural institutions, and it has to do with our right

to be an individual in these contexts; whether we experience equality or the lack of it.

I have also named this 'The realm of Voice'[1]. Dialogue is essential for mutuality in relationships. The interpersonal realm is therefore also concerned with the freedom we feel to speak about our experience, and the extent to which we are able to have an influence on relationships and institutions through sharing our perspectives.

All five women learned from their religious traditions that women belonged in subordinate positions in the Church, family, and community and were to be submissive and silent. They later came to see the necessity of speaking out against the hierarchy and misogyny in these traditions, or of leaving them. A distinction is made here between religion as subordination and spirituality as self-assertion.

**a) Subordination**

All of the participants experienced that religious structures and religious conditioning promoted inequality between men and women. They saw hierarchy as characteristic, with men having power and precedence over women. Four of the participants focused on women's second-class status in religious organizations, including the lack of recognition for work they do for the Church,

[1] Mary Belenky's work was the inspiration for the terms 'Voice', used here, and 'Mind', used in *The transpersonal realm*. I had completed the structures for the Themes, named the four themes and eight sub-themes as they are at present, and was using the term 'Self' in *The intrapersonal realm*, when I attended a conference at which Mary Belenky gave a workshop. After listening to her I realized that the terms Voice and Mind would fit the structure I had formulated and enrich it. I was fortunate enough to join Ms. Belenky for lunch, and during our conversation, suggested to her that Self, Voice and Mind could be described as the intrapersonal, interpersonal, and transpersonal domains, respectively. She was enthusiastic about the connection, and called it 'an elegant fit'.

while one was primarily concerned with the abuse of women which she felt is condoned by traditional religion.

**Hierarchy, domination, and exploitation:** Although all of the women spoke in one way or another about religion and hierarchy, Miriam clearly set out the structure as she experienced it in her own tradition:

> In the Jewish tradition there are three segments. In the Orthodox, the woman sits in the back of the temple: she is not allowed to sit up front with the men. She is very much a second-class citizen. She was not allowed to study religion, or go into the ministry. In Israel at the Wailing Wall, it's separated. Men have their Wailing Wall, and women are not permitted to go there, they are on the other side and I experienced that, when I went there. But there are other sections, the Conservative and the Reform. In the Conservative, women play a part, though it is very much 'women's work', and is considered of lesser importance; it's very much separate... Reform Judaism, they do their own thing, and women play a much stronger part within the Reform. We were Conservative, and I drew the conclusion that women were second-class citizens; men are the authorities, the leaders, the teachers, and the students.

Men's pre-eminent status gave Miriam the impression that women were incomplete in themselves and therefore needed men in order to be whole, strong, and complete spiritually. As a result, she became dependent upon men's support and affirmation to give her life meaning:

> That was the pain, for me as a woman, still thinking the man is the answer. Sex is the answer, or the lover, if you will just reassure me, that will be it. You see, for me the womanly thing was, that aspect, spiritually I know that we incorporate both feminine and masculine characteristics, and in that is the unity of God, which is not male or female, it's everything. But I was trained in such a way that I wouldn't experience that unity.

For Kayde, hierarchy in the Church was manifested in the division of labour between men and women, with women assigned the menial tasks:

> It means the women make coffee, and run the kitchen, and teach Sunday School. Take minutes. Make telephone calls. It means that the language doesn't change. It means that it's a men's club. Women certainly are a cut beneath.

She felt that the relative positions of men and women reflected male privilege rather than competence or ability:

> I used to say, "You know, when ministers get ordained, what makes them different?" It's that hierarchy thing. It seems to me that they get sent off to seminary to supposedly learn everything that women kind of knew all our lives, and they come out of seminary and they still don't know about that experience of God, or whatever it is. And it's because of whatever they did to Christianity that squeezed out the good part.

She also felt that ordination, rather than being something 'holy', all too frequently was "a power that you are given. It's a power over. I see it as a power over. And in many cases I have experienced it as a power over . . . It's an authoritarian thing". She described the impact of this hierarchical arrangement on her personal relationships with men in the Church:

> It means, for me, having to be very outspoken to men when I want to get a point across. It means I personally have to worry about sounding like a miserable bitch in front of a group of men to get my point across about things.

Kayde felt that whatever was good in Christianity got "squeezed out" with the subordination of women:

> I started reading literature in feminist material that went right back to ancient spirituality. I thought, good God, this thing about women's strength, women's being, this goes before Christianity,

> this is where it was real. What the heck did Christianity, how convoluted and sick did Christianity get that that's been lost; that women are invisible, subordinate.

Jen was very aware as a teenager of women's subordination in society and this caused her a great deal of suffering. Her father took the traditional religious position that women's subordination was due to Eve's sinfulness. While Jen did not agree with this, she was conditioned to think that women's inferior status was somehow warranted and inevitable:

> I loved my father, but to him, he would go back to Adam and Eve and say it was woman's fault that there was sin. So the woman was seen as less than man. And I internalized that. I *believed* that . . . Even though I didn't think that it came from there . . . I had internalized that that was set, that a woman was in such and such a place, and it was different. Women had a lesser place.

The impact this had on her personal life was profound. Jen considered traditional marriage to be oppressive to women and thought that she would have greater freedom to develop herself, and a more influential voice in society, by becoming a nun. When she did so she discovered that subordination of women is built into the hierarchy of the Church. She described the inequality:

> The double standard between men and women. Given the way the vows are made in religious life. . . . For the men, they have way more freedom, for instance for budgeting their own things, for leading their own lives, than women do. It's more restrictive for women. If women did something, they would be breaking the rules, but if men did the same thing, they would not be breaking the vows!

The injustice went beyond the restrictions on personal freedom. According to Jen, nuns did as much or more work than priests yet their contribution to the Church was ignored:

> I would give communion, do everything but consecrate the Host. I would have the responsibility, but when it came to being honoured as the person who had done the work, who had led the people, it was the priest who was honoured. So big deal. In the Church, we are supposed to be humble, anyway. But it would get to the point where it would be frustrating because I had done all the work and it would not be recognized as such . . . So you do the work, the nuns for centuries have done a lot of work, but in the ritual of the Church, there is no room for the women.

When I asked her how she felt about not being able to be a priest, she replied:

> I couldn't see why not. My father would disagree with me, he was very much a man in that way, socialized by society as such . . . I would argue with the priests. Why can't a woman be a priest? What's the big difference?

*I: What were you told?*

> No, because Jesus was a man. You could be like Mary, in a subservient role, but you couldn't be a priest. That was special to the man. They would say, it is theology. There is a theological reason. I don't think that that is right. I think that that is crazy.

Jen suggested that subordination of women, rather than being inevitable, is a result of men in prominent positions in the hierarchy clinging to privilege. She felt that reform is needed, believing that Christ "gave women more power in the church of his time" and that later, women lost this power:

> It was the Church that took it away, because of the times, but now it's changing, but the Church is not changing with the times, and that bothers me. What is so drastic about those kinds of changes, that it would mean that men are less, if women would be given more roles? I find that it would be even healthier, and I have found that when women work with men, there is more of a sense of cooperation in the groups. Women have as much of a brain as a man.

Jen was very pointed in her assessment of why the Church is unwilling to change. In her opinion it is because the present structure allows men to maintain authority, and women to be exploited:

> There is a double standard in the Church, regarding men and women. And they are rationalizing that, because it has been like that forever, and they would have to change, and change would involve them having to see that women are an asset in leadership roles in the Church, and they don't want to see it. And it means that they can use women the way they want. If she doesn't have a say in it, then there is less discussion, there is less working through things, they have the say, and that's how it is, it's more authoritarian. They have less people to discuss with, and dialogue with, it's easier. This is not good.

The lack of genuine, mature relationships among members of the Church, particularly men and women, was the central focus of Monique's conflict with her tradition. When she was a young girl, she had admired the priests she met, and had been inspired to become a nun through her contact with them. She longed to be part of a caring, dedicated congregation where people respected and supported each other. She was drawn to a religious life because she imagined that it was in the Church that she would find the humanity and close relationships that she sought. She thought that the priests and bishops were strong and compassionate. She wanted to help them in their work to create a more loving human community; to be a co-worker with them. When she became a nun, she began to see more and more clearly that equality and community were blocked by the hierarchical structure of the Church. Nuns were definitely in a subordinate position, because they were women, and were expected to be self-effacing and defer to the men in the hierarchy.

The hierarchical relationship between priests and nuns was evident for Monique in the greater autonomy permitted to priests. Though their obligations to the Church were the same, women religious were under many more constraints than male religious:

> I questioned the fact that a lot of these rules the priests had to follow were so very different than nuns had. But I didn't feel that was right. We were both religious, we had the same tradition, the same vows, and how come we had so many more restrictions than they did? See, there was always this thing of looking at how men were better off in the Church than I was. I noticed that right from the beginning, and I questioned it.

Hierarchy was signified by the difference in rules, and established by the fact that only priests could consecrate the Host and hear confession. Nuns had to confess to a male priest in order to prepare for communion. Since only priests can mediate between God and the individual person and only men can be priests, the hierarchy of God, priest and nun (and by implication God, man and woman) is secured. Confession was a problematic issue for Monique, the source of a tremendous amount of pain and anger. The belief that it was through confession to a priest that reconciliation with God, herself, and others became possible resulted in her giving over her personal power, and consolidating the Church's authority over her. She spoke of the effect this had on herself and her relationships:

> That was one of the conflicts at the end, is that I realized that I was very, very angry, because I felt that I had stayed as a child, having to confess to a man. I felt that I had been very immature, that I had given my responsibility over to someone else, through that one sacrament especially. And part of the awakening was through doing a research on reconciliation. And discovering that it wasn't necessary to confess to somebody to be reconciled with oneself,

> and with God . . . And that I could be reconciled through different actions, and especially through reality in a relationship. That was more honest than confessing to a third person. So that was part of the process at the end that awakened me to the unrealistic way I had with my faith, or, not the real way.

Although Monique felt she had been naïve and immature in her personal faith, she knew she had been an effective and responsible worker for the Church. She experienced, however, that because she was a nun her work was not acknowledged:

> In the parish, even while the priest was there, I was doing all the work and he was getting all the credit. Because people see the priest as the one who is God's representative, and I wasn't . . . That's the way the structure of the Church is. He would have all the authority even if I would do all the work.

She had achieved the highest position possible for a nun in a parish, yet when she disagreed with the local Bishop discovered that the Church "is so male-dominated that I have no place in it":

> I really felt I was a good leader. But in the Catholic Church, the vision is that it is the priest who is the leader, and as a nun, my power is limited. And what little I had could be taken away at any time. And it was, that's the way it happened.

Monique, like Kayde, felt that the Church was inadequate and unsatisfactory primarily because of its subordination of women:

> I think that's the greatest failing . . . women! They don't accept women at all. A lot of those men [priests] don't know how to have relationships. The Church structure itself keeps women down. It doesn't accept women as leaders. That's what makes me see that I don't have a place there. . . That's why the Church is so lousy, because women don't have a say in it.

She felt very strongly that the Church had failed her; that rather than being a supportive community it was an unjust institution badly in need of reformation.

**Abuse**: Traditional religious assumptions that God is male, and hierarchy appropriate, with God and men having power over women, were major factors affecting Pat's experience of her religion. This was because of their intensely negative impact on her family life and personal relationships. She was raised in a home where her mother was physically abused by her father, and yet remained in the marriage because of the prohibition against divorce:

> She said: "My religious belief is that when I married that man I was to stay with him forever and ever, 'til death do us part", going to the marriage vows, and that's what she really believes. She lived being beaten up for 42 years because part of her religion told her that . . . no matter what she was supposed to stand behind that man. And it's all crazy. Very crazy.

During our conversations Pat made a connection between her belief that God was male, her experience that men close to her were abusive, and her loss of religious faith. She had been talking about the weekend workshop where she got in touch with her "inner self", and regained a sense of her spirituality:

> And on that weekend I discovered that I was afraid of my father. I hadn't known it before. I had felt, of all the family, that I have been the most loving to him. That may also relate to God, because I see God as a male, not as a female.

*I: You still do?*

> I hadn't thought about that part today, but you know when I relate back to the feelings where I was at, to me god was male, not female. Definitely not female.

*I: Could you tell me a bit more about that?*

I hadn't really thought about it.

*I: What made you think God was male?*

It maybe goes back to my religion, my Bibles and my Sunday School teachings. I would say that it goes back to the Bible, definitely. That's where I learned God was definitely male. It was a teaching, it taught me God was male. I didn't question it.

*I: How does that relate to you as a female, then? As a female, you're different than God, then, are you not?*

That's right. Definitely different. I remember as a child, I felt that I wasn't worthy of love, and I was a girl, but I looked at my brother, who was younger than I was, and I thought of him as being worthy of love. That's an answer as to why I abandoned Him [God], because the men in our lives were abusive.

The issue of physical abuse of women was central to Pat's conflict with religion. She was deeply concerned that traditional religion continued to give women the message that they were less valuable than men, and that their first responsibility was to husband and marriage rather than their own safety and well-being. Demonstrating that the Church continued to fail women in this area, she talked about a friend who had gone to a priest for marital counselling, and his advice:

The people that a friend of mine turned to when she was in an abusive situation, were religious people, a priest and a minister. The priest gave her some kind of support, but his religious beliefs gave her the words that she should try harder. This priest does not believe in divorce, of course. He believes that you should accept the situation. She was looking to those people that she believed in, because they are supposed to be representing God for us in our physical life, and when that person says to you, and she shared with me, she cried about it, it scares her to death to think that she stayed all that time . . . She's just now beginning to realize that she is a

> person. Is that what spirituality and religion is? Uh-uh. That is really sick.

Where Pat's concern was with physical abuse, and religious teachings that suggested women should put up with an abusive situation in their homes, several of the other participants recounted their personal experience of emotional abuse by clergy. Monique described one such time in her life:

> I had a job as a pastoral agent at a Church, and the priest wasn't treating me right, and he was an alcoholic. And I remember a dream I had, and in this dream my head was being cut off and I was dying. I was dying in that job, and in that relationship with that priest.

Kayde spoke of the moment when she became aware that she had been emotionally abused by the priest in her congregation:

> I asked for the appropriate services to be held . . . There were comments that he made to me that rang bells, and it was from that point on that I was extremely angry. And I was not only angry about the way I thought I was being treated, but I became aware at that point of how I *had* been treated, *all along*. And how I had lived my life, beholden to people; looking after people; kowtowing.

Eventually she began to see that the abuse went beyond her own personal experience, and in fact reflected attitudes towards women that were deeply ingrained in traditional religious systems. This awareness preceded her interest in feminist theology, which then confirmed her observations:

> In the Church, there was a whole part of the person that wasn't being validated, really a put-down on women. There are parallels to how the Church treats women, with the way women are treated in the medical system. Women's experiences like menopause are *pathologized*. So where do I come off with feminist theology? It started with my awareness that women were treated so poorly. And I can remember crying at women who were so screwed up

> physically; it was from their own agony and their anger and their abuse. So when I started reading feminist theology, I thought, this is what I have been thinking for years! Here it is, it's under a heading, feminist theology!

In traditional religion the primary taboo is against sexuality rather than aggression. This likely reflects a male bias, in that it is a view through men's eyes: women's association with sex makes both bad, men's association with aggression makes aggression acceptable. For years, Jen had felt the effects of this emphasis on sexuality as sin in an intensely personal way. After leaving the Church she saw things very differently:

> People can abuse others. That's what the evil spirit is, when people don't take responsibility for their actions, while imposing their will on others. That's evil. That's what's evil.

Though she was referring here to the subordination of native religion by white culture, based on comments she made throughout our conversations it accurately reflects her feelings about the subordination of women, as well.

**b) Self-assertion**

All of the women in this study experienced subordination, yet longed for authentic relationship. They wanted to feel a genuine sense of belonging in their religious communities; to share what they truly thought and felt, and at the same time to be received by the community. For many years most of them believed that it was not possible to do both. They felt that in order to remain connected with their religious traditions they had to remain silent about their discomfort with many things that they observed and experienced: the hierarchy, the authoritarianism, the disregard for women, the abuse and exploitation of women.

They were also not able to assert themselves because they did not have a sense of their own value, and believed that they did not have the right to object to their subordination. The prohibition against self-assertion is essential for the maintenance of oppressive systems, and these women knew they were expected to remain silent in their traditions. They were caught in a double bind because along with the demand that they be silent and submissive, their traditions made women responsible for relationships. Related to as subordinates, not accepted as equals, it was to be expected that they experienced that relationships were superficial, artificial, or abusive. They all saw the need for authentic dialogue in their traditions, and for transformed relationships. Through painful experiences, the women knew that this would not be achieved through submission. They learned that it was necessary to assert themselves and share their perceptions and concerns, and they found the courage to speak. In asserting themselves, they were expressing their spirituality through challenging oppression and inequality.

**Needing a voice:** Four of the women spoke, one briefly, three at length, about the authoritarianism they encountered in their traditions and their need to challenge it. Two of these women emphasized the lack of dialogue in religious communities; one told of what occurred when she did assert herself.

The struggle to find a voice, and the desire to create a relational community were the key issues for Kayde in her conflict with religious tradition. Our conversations spiraled out from these issues and returned to them again and again. I cannot overemphasize their importance for Kayde. She made recurrent references to women's silence and invisibility in traditional religion, their need

for a voice, her personal difficulties in gaining a voice, and her hopes for, and efforts to create, a community based on dialogue and authentic encounter among the congregation.

A turning point in Kayde's relationship with the Church was when she realized she was being treated poorly by religious authorities. The incident involved the responses she got when she requested certain services from the Church. She became aware at that point of her need to assert herself in the Church:

> Women are supposed to be silent in the Church. And by George, they are! More recently, I am quite verbal. When I talk about me avoiding my feelings about the Church, it's me being silent; it's me not saying anything; it's me knowing that isn't right; knowing full well that it didn't feel right to be refused a baptism; I was inappropriately and wrongly reprimanded when I asked for funeral services.

Some years later, Kayde became aware of the need not only for her personal voice, but for women's voice in the Church. She was concerned about the lack of inclusive language, and felt that the liturgy format "condones oppression of women". She objected to the literal reference to scripture, with its exclusively androcentric imagery for the Divine which she felt was a "put-down" on women. When she attempted to share her sense of the sacred, she was ignored or treated with disdain. She experienced that her tradition excluded women, and she longed for them to be involved in a way that would inspire and empower them:

> In my tradition . . . it doesn't speak for me. I thought, what am I doing here? First of all, it's not inclusive language. And I can't relate to this. I felt left out. I thought, I would love to tell this story

> in such a way that women would catch fire. I wish that somebody would, I wish that a woman would have stood up and talked to me when I was young, in my parish. If only someone had told me the stories, in different language, I would have felt so validated.

Kayde wanted voice to be an agent of inclusion rather than exclusion, of dialogue rather than oppression:

> I'd love to dialogue in the sermon. I'd like to say, "Wait a minute. What about ----, well what if ----, and have you ever thought about ---- ?"

Mischievously, she imagined publicly challenging the lack of dialogue and the hierarchy, at the same time revealing that what she really desired was genuine communion among members of the congregation:

> I think one of these days I'm going to stand up in the middle of the sermon and say, "You're full of shit! (Laughter) Or I'm going to turn around and say to everyone, "Do you believe this crap?" (Laughter) What I *really want to say* is, "Let's all get up and make a big circle in the church and let's all pretend we can look each other in the eye instead of peeking over your shoulder to see if anybody is still sitting in the pew."

Jen was unequivocal in her criticism of the authoritarianism in her tradition. She experienced that the Church was closed to questioning and dialogue, and thought that the very structure of the Church was designed to prevent people from having a voice. Questioning or dissenting voices were punished and silenced by exclusion and "excommunication". She felt that there was no intent on the part of the Church hierarchy to communicate openly with the members. She described her tradition in the following way:

> Very dogmatic, very authoritarian, you had to think like them . . . The Church listens to laws, not to reason. So there is a lot of room for abuse of authority in the Church . . . Because of the structure,

> you can't question authorities. So there is no dialogue with community . . . If that person in there believes he's got all the rights, he is the one that is the safeguard of all these things for God, that he knows better than anyone else -- how can you dialogue with someone like that? You can't do it. He decides what you can say or can't say. So you can't disagree with him, or you get thrown out.

During the years that she was associated with her tradition, Jen had observed that people have a need for self-assertion. The psychological consequences of submission, of lacking a voice, could be severe:

> It makes even that same [submissive] people become sick, mentally ill, when they are in situations like that . . . And it is a mental sickness when you are dominated by someone else, because a human being is not made to be dominated. I mean we have a will of our own, and an intelligence to speak up, and when that's not, then that's repression, that is oppression, and there is a loss for everyone when that happens.

The loss the Church was incurring for its rejection of dialogue, for its oppression of the individual voice, was its diminishing membership. Here Jen makes explicit the link between Being and Relating, between a positive sense of self, and healthy relationships:

> The Church is losing a lot of people, and it can't work, it doesn't work. If it's not a healthy relationship, where a person is validated for being, there is no way that there can be any kind of relationship. You have to have your being in there.

Monique endured the unreasonable demands for submission in her tradition. Eventually, she refused to accept them. As a consequence of her public disagreement with a member of the Church hierarchy, she was forced to leave the parish where she had been working. She talked of her need to speak out, and the consequences:

> Other people were thinking like me, but I was not as submissive. I didn't hide as much. And submissiveness was necessary for this person . . . I could see the other nuns bending down to his commands, and I wasn't going to be like that . . . I wasn't going to say, "Yes, you are right" . . . Because he *wasn't* right . . . Other people were saying, "Yes sir, yes sir". And I still don't understand how they can do it. Because some of those things are not even Christian. A lot of people understand that this person is not right, but nobody stands up to him. But then he kicked me out.

As a result of this event Monique took steps to leave her tradition entirely. She had come to the conclusion that authentic relationship was not possible in her tradition: "It helped me to decide I couldn't play this game anymore. There was no relationship, and to me relationship was very important".

Although Miriam's background and circumstances were very different from Monique's, she also experienced that she was subordinate, that other people higher up in the hierarchy were the ones with the authority and the right to a voice, and that she was expected to obey their commands:

> Everything focused on, if it's not working in my life, it's my fault. Because I am somehow down here, and everybody else is up there, dictating, calling the shots in my life, making my choices for me. And God, probably, was it. So in other words my gods were my husband, or society, or my religious tradition.

Later in our conversation Miriam spoke of her belief that even in an oppressive tradition, the possibility of gaining a voice exists:

> Even where there is the message of hell and damnation if you don't shape up, within that is the very seed of freedom to say, uh uh, I don't buy that.

**Finding a voice:** All of the women were becoming more confident in speaking about their experience and asserting themselves when appropriate. For Miriam this development came through her involvement in an alternative spiritual organization. The other four women described instances where they spoke out within their traditions. Once they began to gain their voice, two of the women maintained a connection with their traditions while two found that they had to leave them.

Kayde described an event that occurred around the time she consciously set out to find her voice in the Church, and to develop her capacity to express herself. She was in a study group in the Church and was asked to bring a devotion. She picked out something from the Bible that was meaningful to her, but discovered that she wasn't understood by the male minister. He reacted as if what she had to say was incomprehensible. She described his response:

> I read it, and I was really enjoying myself, and he looked at me with a wrinkled brow and he said, "Well, what does that mean?", and I said, "It's the story of such and such". And he said, "Well, as long as *you* know what it's all about". And that was it. That was my validation for worship again and again.

This incident furthered Kayde's interest in and commitment to feminist theology:

> I said, "There's nothing wrong with this devotion, this is me, this is me talking here". (Laughter) So where did I get into feminist theology? What's the matter with a woman praying? What I had to say was very valid for who I am in this situation. What did they want me to say? . . . So that's how I got into feminist theology. Speaking about God from a woman's mouth. Speaking about a woman's God.

Although she felt angry about the way she had been responded to in a number of situations, she spoke of anger as "the energy I experience in making changes". While acknowledging that she was becoming more able to assert herself, and that this was a legitimate expression of her spirituality, she still found it challenging:

> I hope I don't ever get apathetic, and feel wilted, that I can't combat it. I have a stance within me that can now face up to the misogyny, the hierarchy and all of that, and walk in there and *name* it when I see it. And it's very difficult to do. And it's honouring the spiritual side of me. It's me taking responsibility for that, when I speak about what my experience is.

In spite of the difficulty, Kayde had the courage to speak. She described her process:

> When you sit there and your heart pounds, and all these angry words come up inside, and I deal with those, and then I say, "I take exception to that put down. I feel put down, as a woman, by this, and maybe you could put that in different words".

Pat described an incident in which she spoke out in front of other members of her church, challenging what she felt what was an unrealistic and overly passive reliance on God. This event was obviously very important to her, reflecting as it did her growing confidence in her own voice.

> I can recall going to a church group, it was an evening session . . . and there was a woman there who stood and said in no uncertain terms that you just had to have God in order to live, in other words God was the answer to all of the dysfunctions that are going on in society, God was the answer, this is what is the answer, this is how you have to do it . . . I said, "I don't mean to step on anyone's feet, but God is not the answer for me. He is not my answer. I'm dealing with a whole bunch of stuff, and I can go sit in church

> every day and God is not going to sort this mess out for me. I have to do it". So God can't do it for me.

Jen spoke of the responsibility of those who are oppressed to speak out, and of the difficulty of doing so:

> It is the oppressed that has to stand up against the oppressor, the oppressor can't do it for them, you know . . . But at the same time, it's kind of a Catch-22, because if the oppression is so strong that there is no way for the oppressed to do anything, then there is a responsibility for those people in authority . . . If there is enough understanding within the people in authority to validate any kind of growth, then it happens.

She discovered in her own conflict with her religious tradition that it limited and restricted her ability to develop herself and to make a meaningful contribution to life to the extent that she had to leave. When I asked her what allowed her to take the step of leaving the Church, she spoke of being silenced, and of breaking that silence:

> Maybe even being pushed by the oppressor to the point where I didn't want to go anymore . . . The problem was that I was not saying what I needed to say, and getting the message that I didn't have a say, that I shouldn't be saying anything. Finally, I stood up and said what I needed, and some things changed, but there came a point where there was just some things that they did not want to change, and that is why I left . . . I wanted to have more of a say in things, and it just wasn't acceptable.

Monique had found her voice and asserted herself in her tradition, with the result that she had been told to leave. When she left her tradition she was able to transfer her learning, and begin to assert herself in relationships where she felt dominated. She could also accept more easily the letting go that was sometimes

necessary. However, she felt that she still had much to learn about "how relationships work", that is, how to realize equality in relationships:

> Now I've learned to even *cut* relationships, even if it hurts them at first. I've learned to listen to *me*. I still have a bit of a hard time with it, and I have been hurt myself, by people who have left, also, when I said how I felt about what was happening in the relationship, that I felt dominated, that did hurt. I wanted to keep the friendship, but I wanted it to change. And the other person didn't. I haven't completely sorted out how relationships work.

In the process of her spiritual journey, Miriam came to prize her right to a voice, and chose to express it and encourage it in others through her ministry. She believed that each person had the potential and the responsibility to contribute to life in their own unique way, and that spiritual development involved speaking from the truth that was within them; that came from their own conscience, their own experience, their own creative vision. She believed that if we want to be in touch with and express our spirituality, we cannot simply be silent when our traditions do not speak for us. We have to find our own voice:

> What I tell people is that each of you has your own ministry. By silent assent you are buying into the vision of limitation.

### 3. The transpersonal realm: Creating

This is the realm of creativity; of a person's experience of contributing to their culture in ways that flow from their authentic being. It has to do with the nature and quality of our self-expression; the sense we have that we can act in the world and benefit others through freely chosen responsibilities that allow us to actualize our unique potential.

I have also named this the realm of Mind.[2] The transpersonal realm is concerned with our awareness of and response to cultural materials: with our discovery that it is possible to go beyond the cultural roles, rules and assumptions that have provided us with a self-definition, constrained our behaviour and perceptions, and conditioned the vision we have of our creative potential and of what is 'right', 'good', or 'proper' for us to be doing; and with our actively questioning, re-visioning, and behaving in ways that take us beyond the limiting patterns of our cultural systems.

In speaking about their conflict with traditional religion, all of the women referred to a need to experience their own creative power; to think for themselves and see themselves as capable people who could make choices, act effectively in the world, and take responsibility for constructing their own lives. The distinction to be made here is between religion as determination by others and spirituality as self-determination. These issues are intimately tied to the other two themes, and many relevant comments may be found there.

**a) Determination by others**

As the women spoke of their experience in their traditions, they described it as one of being determined by others. They were expected to obey rules and conform to roles. Autonomy and initiative were discouraged. They were either not encouraged to think independently or were judged and sanctioned for doing so. They were expected to sacrifice any sense of self-determination.

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[2] See footnote 1, page 88, for acknowledgement.

Though the women did experience in a very real way that their lives were being determined by others, several spoke about their own co-operation with this process. This issue is complex. On the one hand the women wanted to be strong and independent. The difficulty with this was that they also wanted to belong, and experienced that obedience or conformity to roles was the price they had to pay for fitting in to their communities. Also, as a result of being told what they had to think and how they had to behave, they lost confidence in their own judgment and capacity to direct their lives, or else felt bad or guilty when they began to think or act in ways that contradicted the submissive, dependent role in which they had been cast. On the other hand several women also acknowledged the lure of the false paradise of dependency. After trying to conform to the dependent role, however, they discovered that the price was simply too high. It was costing them their souls, in the sense of authenticity in their lives and self-development. These issues are addressed under submission, costs, and dependency and disillusionment.

**Submission:** Although all of the women talked in one way or another about the pressure to conform to roles, the necessity for obedience in the Catholic tradition was the key to Jen's conflict with her religion. This issue arose recurrently in our conversations and was the core of Jen's disillusionment with Catholicism. She spoke about how the Church limited people's ability to make responsible choices by constructing rules for behaviour that had to be followed without question:

> If I really believe in the value of making my own decisions, then I would believe it for every other human being. And it is not valued there, that each human being should be able to make decisions for

> themselves. Some people were stronger than others, and they would stand up, but they would be criticized for that. And I didn't like that. It's the judgment part that I don't like either. And when something becomes wrong or right, since they have the power, they can do something about it. It *is* wrong. They are making it wrong . . . They are the ones that decide what is right or wrong, and what behaviour to follow.

Also:

> We do not question rules enough in our tradition. We are not allowed to.

Although Jen disagreed with many of the rules because she thought they restricted her behaviour in meaningless ways and got in the way of relating naturally with others, she continued to submit to them because her conditioning for obedience was so strong:

> I was becoming very dissatisfied with what was happening. But the last thing that went, was obedience. To feel good about myself, I thought I had to obey like Christ obeyed, up to the end, up to being crucified.

When I asked Jen who she was obeying, she said:

> I obey God, that is represented by my community's Superior . . .

*I: Where does your own conscience come in, then?*

> You have to obey, in the end. I was still a child, because that's what I needed to be. In the community, childhood is valued, like you have to be a child of God.

*I: But what do they mean by being a child?*

> There is always that fear that you would be following your own inspiration, like, your own false spirit. So you always had to check whether your spirit was right or wrong.

*I: And how would you know?*

> So then, if you had a conflict, if you had a doubt, it was always better to follow someone else than yourself.. It can be very convenient for not taking responsibility. Extremely convenient. So instead, when I felt those conflicts and began to do what I needed to do, I wouldn't tell them. So I became a hypocrite. And I didn't want to be a hypocrite, either. (Laughter) So that's how eventually I left. Because I couldn't stand being a hypocrite anymore.

Monique had also been trained to believe that obedience was a pre-eminent virtue. As a result, she lost control over her own life:

> Because I had believed the way I had, I had let a lot of people control me.

*I: How so?*

> Well, the religious order, through the vows, they had controlled my life. And then the priests, through confession, and the rules. The rules of the Church; you can't do this, you can't do that. I had to be a certain way.

There were many times when Monique found herself in disagreement with the Church, but because she was conditioned to obey she blamed herself rather than the system she was constrained by when things didn't seem to be working in her life:

> I would struggle with a lot of things that happened during the day, concrete things, practical things. But I would resolve it with obedience, and resignation, and just trying harder, or feeling guilty. Thinking it was my fault if things weren't working well. I would have to work harder at it.

A large part of the reason why Monique continued to accept restrictions that seemed unjust or unreasonable was because of her love and affection for some of the male clergy:

> I didn't know why men had more privileges than women. But I accepted it. It was the way it was, and when I rejected it was when it affected me personally. That's when it really had an effect on me. You see, because I loved those men . . . I did love a lot of those . . . some of them, not all of them.

Another factor that maintained Monique's submissiveness was the message she received from the Church that she was to fear a sense of her personal power. She eventually came to see the hypocrisy in this, but not before it caused her a great deal of mental and emotional turmoil:

> We are getting a double message. The Pope has the most power, and at the same time we are told that power is not good, and we are supposed to really watch it. For a long time, this kept me really submissive. And I was feeling guilty, also, because it wasn't right for me to want those things. Yet at the same time I would look at others that were supposed to be spiritual, and they did have power. It is kind of crazy making.

Finally, Monique came to see the submission required by her tradition not as a virtue, but primarily as a failing:

> I've got a hard time seeing Catholic people . . . I see them as sheep, I guess, a lot. And it used to be my community, my people. I was a dupe for so long.

**Costs:** Kayde was aware of the demands for submission in her roles of wife, daughter, and member of the Church. In order not to pay the cost of losing touch with her creativity, she dissociated and formed a separate space where she could maintain a sense of herself:

> I have become more aware of what I do in order to function. I have honoured that inner freedom, that spiritual side of myself that's creative and playful and really doesn't fit into the mold over

> there: 'Be a good wife and a good daughter', all that stuff, those roles.

However, Kayde did pay a price for stepping outside the limitations expected of her:

> And I still get caught up in that, guilt around those roles the Church gives to women.

The costs of submission as Monique experienced them were the loss of independent thought, of normal relationships, and of the right to make decisions about the fruits of her labour:

> I like to see people develop themselves, and I didn't feel that it was by being submissive that you could do this. And yet, see, I was being submissive in my community. I had all these ideas of democratic teaching, of empowering people, of helping them to think. Yet at the same time I was in two structures that did just the opposite.

And:

> I couldn't have a mind of my own in that Church . . . There was no relationship, and to me relationship was very important. And I couldn't think independently.

Also:

> It's total obedience. Then chastity. There's so many rules around it, that you can't have normal relationships. And poverty -- you don't have the right to any money. Until the last year, just before I left, I had no control over the money at all . . . I was earning a lot of money as a teacher, and I would ask for a little bit for the classroom, or the parish, and they never wanted to give any.

Monique regretted that as a result of the Church's appeal to faith, she did not develop her own mind. She wondered if the same was true of the Pope and Bishops:

> I had this doubt that maybe this wasn't true, that Jesus wasn't in the Eucharist, and bread and wine . . . and I went to see the Mistress of Novices, and told her this, and she said, "Do you think all the Bishops of the Church could all be wrong?" And I swallowed that. I thought, well, that's true. That's what faith is based on, is on the witnesses of other people, and I swallowed it! And so I feel that I stayed a child for so very long, that I didn't take in hand my own thoughts. I depended on the witnesses. But that's what faith is. But I think, though I don't know, when you get older, if most people, even the Pope and the Bishops, if at one point when they really *mature* . . . or do they all stay children, and depend on witnesses of people? Of others, before them?

The pressure not to think independently was so pervasive that Monique came to the following conclusion: "The structure of my religion, I was, well, to say it in a simple word, it was brainwashing."

Jen experienced that the Church didn't want her to think independently yet double bound her at the same time:

> You couldn't think for yourself. If you did, you were punished for it and if you didn't, it wasn't ever good enough. So you were caught both ways. There was a lot of anger building up.

As Jen spoke about the costs of obedience being immaturity, truncation of one's potential and for some, loss of mental balance, she also referred to the mixed motives that keep people in submission as not wanting to take responsibility for one's own life, wanting to belong, and wanting to love. In the following comments she describes some of the costs:

> Those that follow are very submissive, and passive, and we tend to consider as saints, but it's sad, there is a loss there. That person could be happier, could be more productive, there is a loss of energy and potential because of roles that have been taken.

And:

> When I came out, I wanted to go and tell them, listen, you made a mistake, you shouldn't have given yourself like that. You took away all your creativity, you took away your decision-making power. And by doing that, you have made yourself a slave.

One motive for self-sacrifice and remaining in an oppressive situation was love. Jen had been taught that complete obedience, to the extent of total denial of the self, was the loving thing to do:

> It's said like that too: 'You've made yourself a slave to God.' I mean, that's the utmost of loving for the spiritual person. You completely become a slave or a servant not having a mind of your own. That's love. The more I studied, the more I saw, well maybe that's not all there is, there could be another way of doing it. And I was very frustrated doing it that way. I wasn't living to all of my potential.

Another motive was the need to belong:

> I wanted to belong so much. And when that is very strong, like I had a need to belong, and I could do that at any cost, if I had to. I think that is what happened to those sisters I saw go a bit off the bend. They wanted to belong so much, they lost even a sense of identity.

Monique also commented on the need to belong, courageously confronting what led her to comply with her own oppression:

> I was intimidated a lot in my religious community. I think it's because I wanted to belong to them. If I analyze myself psychologically, I just feel I was . . . I saw that my own thought

> processes were strange. I was flawed myself. Letting myself be controlled like that . . . I feel a lot of it was my fault.

A third motive was the desire to have someone else take responsibility for one's life. As Jen put it:

> In a sense, it was peaceful, too, because I did not have to struggle with making a decision. I don't have to think it through, I just have to do what they tell me to do. There's no . . . I mean, it can get pretty boring. But there is no anxiety involved, there is no stress . . .

But the cost is:

> There's no growth either.

Miriam made a similar point about dependency:

> The greatest challenge I have and others have is taking it out of the book and into your life. People still have that tendency, and I believe it is what much of mainstream religion caters to, it's like we will tell you what to do, and you will follow. Most people want to be led. That's a really, kind of limited statement to make, but it is easier to be told what to think. Now I'm telling people *how* to think [for themselves].

**Dependency and disillusionment:** All of the women had conformed to the submissive, dependent role until, through various experiences, they discovered that their lives were not working as a result. Miriam had been led to believe that fulfillment would come through her dependence on someone or something else. Then her marriage broke up, and she realized that it was up to her to create a meaningful life for herself:

> That time everything was outer oriented. Well, it will get better if we move, or it will get better if he finds a better job, or if I have more children. It was all focused on bringing something from out there. But it did not work. My husband left the marriage. And it

> was through counseling that the door opened for me. That was the catalyst for self-discovery. So the divorce was really the best thing that happened to me because I realized that I had to create a life for myself.

Monique was also conditioned to conform to the traditional feminine role of passivity and dependence, and this carried over into her role as a nun. She said that she felt she had been kept as a child by her religious tradition. When I asked her to say more about that, she replied:

> I always thought that I needed a man in my life. And I didn't choose a husband, so the man in my life was usually a bishop, or a priest. And I had been dependent on what they thought, and on their forgiveness. And at the same time, it was so superficial.

For her, dependence on a man was also intimately linked to religious faith. This is understandable. Such dependence is encouraged by traditional religion's exclusively male images for God, coupled with its portrayal of God as "the supreme authority". In response to my request that she tell me about what her faith was, and how it changed, she said:

> Well, I believed there was a God, in Heaven. And He was looking after us. And through faith, and hope, and love, life was secure. Life had a meaning. I could always hope, when something was wrong, that God would help me, would be my strength, and my light, and would guide me. God including Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit. They were all men. Well, the Virgin Mary was there too, but as a secondary. But the men were the ones who were going to save me. They were the strength. Not any more.

The consequences of believing this way were that she did not take responsibility for her emotional life and did not deal directly with the issues that were making her anxious and unhappy:

> I used religion as a crutch to help me live one day at a time, for comfort. I would worry a lot, so I remember in the books that I would read, even the passage in the Bible, "Don't worry, God will take care of you", and all that would help me deal with worry. But I got really angry afterwards, because I felt it had only been a comfort blanket, and hadn't really addressed the feelings I was living, you know the things I would have to deal with . . . Instead, it was just like a pill. It didn't really deal with the problems.

The depth of her disillusionment with her tradition and with the dependency that accompanied her faith was revealed in the following comment:

> I remember we used to talk about that . . . The deepness of your faith. The deeper your faith was, now I see the blinder you were. (Laughter)

Jen had been a responsible person as far as her service to the Church went, but not, she felt, in terms of taking charge of her own life. Her disillusionment resulted from her conclusion that these two responsibilities were irreconcilable. She then chose to honour her own life in spite of the difficulties that presented:

> It is very easy to become dependent. It is easier than becoming independent. That's my experience.

*I: But you have made a huge change, to break away from that.*

> But it took me twenty years. So there is a lot of regrets there too. That I hadn't done it sooner.

*I: What are your regrets?*

> I could have done more, I could have acted responsibly. But I did, though, in terms of the institution . . . It was a process, I guess. I didn't see that I had to leave, the first time that I had a conflict. I thought that I could work through things, until at one point I saw it was no use, then I gave up. That's when I left.

Pat had gotten the message from her tradition that attendance at church, and faith in and reliance on God were all she needed in order to solve her problems. She found out that dependence on something outside herself was not the solution:

> I've been to church. I've tried all that. That was not the answer. In physical being I can go to church and sit with all these people that think they are Christian people and I come out and I'm no different than when I went in, nor are they. But is that the answer? . . . He can help, and He can direct us, if we are willing to do our own stuff, but He isn't the answer, out there somewhere. It's in here [pointing to her heart].

All of the women thought that traditional religion encouraged women to be followers and to depend on men, both male clergy and their husbands, to direct their lives. The costs of this arrangement, among others, were that they experienced a lack of confidence in their creative potential and capacity to determine their own lives.

**b) Self-determination**

As the women described how their faith had changed or what spirituality was as they now experienced it, they spoke of letting go of dependencies and conformity to the traditional patterns of behaviour expected of women, and of taking responsibility for their lives. Being responsible involved developing their awareness through questioning, studying, and learning to think for themselves; taking responsibility for their emotional life through self-affirmation and self-nurture; experiencing their creative power through acts of self-expression that reflected their individual interests and concerns; and contributing to their families and communities through service that emerged from who they were as strong and caring women. Spirituality was a sense of freedom and

empowerment. These issues are addressed under the headings autonomy, and beyond traditional systems: declaring independence; creatively expressing self.

**Autonomy**: Miriam's voice was joyful as she recounted her realization that she was an expression of the Divine spirit, that what she thought and felt was important, and that through taking responsibility for this she could create a more meaningful life for herself:

> A Jewish friend of mine introduced me to a church, a non-denominational church, and it was right for me. The whole approach was very much psychologically oriented; they were talking about mental causes and emotional causes that create our world yet they were very gently throwing in the idea of a Divine presence that we are, an expression of, and it grabbed me. I started taking classes and I loved everything that I was hearing. That I am responsible for my own life, that I have within me a Divine nature.

And:

> *I: You're saying, take responsibility.*
>
> Exactly.
>
> *I: The bottom line is, rather than asking God to take responsibility for you, you take responsibility for the God in you.*
>
> Yes. That's true, yes. People need to be reminded of the spiritual truth within themselves, and to get connected to that truth. That was my journey. And that's really where it begins and where it ends, because I can only do what I can do. Non-attachment. I can't be attached to the results. I have to just do what I gotta do and that's the greatest lesson in life, and I have to just let it go.

For Monique also, taking charge of her own life included becoming responsible for her thoughts and feelings. She no longer accepted dogma, rules

and doctrine on faith, uncritically. She went outside her religious tradition and examined it through questioning it and studying it from different perspectives.

> I was thirty-five before I started to question . . . I was even older than that. Really questioning. Really questioning faith itself . . . Then I started questioning everything, I started looking at everything. I had been taught so many things, told so many things, that weren't true. And the only way to find things out was through independent study.

One of the most painful parts of her break from the Church was coming to terms with the way her emotional development had been affected by her religious faith. She felt that she had not matured. At the start of our second conversation I began with the comment, "Just to get a focus again, I'm really interested in you sharing with me what it was like for you, as a woman, to be part of your religious tradition". She replied:

> Well . . . (pause) . . . I . . . Just my life went through my mind just now. And the word woman. When did I become a woman. And I think I was a child for so long, that I think I became a woman when I discovered that I didn't have to depend on someone else for reconciliation. That is when I realized a lot of things about myself.

What she meant by this was that she discovered that she did not need a man or an institution to mediate between her and God, or between her and other people, or between her and her own soul. In the following passage she recounts one of the key moments when she took responsibility for her own strength:

> I had loved this Bishop a lot, and the last time he came to the West, I was still a sister . . . Usually, we would shake hands, the Bishop I liked, there was a warm feeling. And my father had died before that, so I had let go of my father, also. And at that point, I let go of the love I had for this man, there was nothing left. And I think, I know, that he also felt it. And that was painful, because I think I hurt him, and I did owe him a lot, in some ways. But I let go and

> at that point, I grew. I let him know I wasn't a little girl anymore, that I wasn't going to depend on him. In a way it felt good, and in another way, I think I hurt him, and I felt bad about that. But for myself, it freed me. I tried to be sincere with my feelings. I was no longer trying to please everybody, always pleasing others. . . It's hard to let go of a father figure. I think it was easier to let go of my father that died, than with him. It wasn't easy. And he represented the whole Church also, for me.

At this point, Monique made a conscious decision to take responsibility for her emotional fulfillment, spiritual development, and direction in life.

In talking about her process of becoming responsible for directing her own life, Jen described being caught between two fears: a fear of dependence and at the same time a fear of being unable to capably manage her own life. Ultimately, dependence was more frightening. She told of how she felt about her religious community after first leaving it:

> There is a certain amount of wanting to connect. But before, I didn't want to do it, because there was a certain fear of falling back in that. A big fear. Not a certain fear, a *real* fear . . .

She also described how she felt about being on her own. She initially needed support and encouragement from others while she regained her confidence:

> To come back from that state, to taking on responsibility, I was extremely scared, at that point. Afraid whether what I was going to do was okay. Like I needed a lot of approval. Like people saying, "You're doing great, keep on", because I didn't believe in myself anymore . . . So little by little I regained it in my classroom, in front of the community.

Kayde explained how she became aware that it was up to her to find a way to take care of her emotional needs:

> I was raised to believe that the Church was a place where you could get that support and comfort. And I tried that. And that Church wasn't there. And I thought, bullshit! And that's when I learned that Church wasn't out there, that Church was inside. That I am my own comfort; that I am my own nurturer.

Not only was her emotional life not being nurtured by the Church; she was not being encouraged to apply her potential towards creating a meaningful existence for herself. When she realized that her life was being determined for her in ways that did not nourish her spirit, she took responsibility for making her own choices and finding a direction in life that was much more fulfilling:

> It was, like, I can't get anything from you guys, because you have a set of rules that I'm supposed to follow, and what I really want is over here, so I'll have to do this on my own. And I've done it in the eyes of the public and my friends, which is me coming to terms with who I am, and moving on, and getting out of a marriage that was dead, taking that life-giving part of myself and nurturing it on into other things, and wanting to change and help other people grow in the same way -- challenge them, empower them.

**Beyond traditional systems: Declaring independence; creatively expressing self:** Monique was able to go beyond the limited and limiting frame of traditional religion by broadening her mind through opening herself to a multiplicity of perspectives, while not allowing any particular viewpoint to dogmatically condition her own thoughts. She described the process of her liberation:

> I still feel I was a fool for so long. In a way now I feel I did the right thing, I learnt. I had some insights, and I freed myself from the structure of the Church.

*I: How did you do that? . . .*

> I listened to other voices, to other points of view, other ways of looking at the world. I used to depend on wanting to be loved by somebody else. And now I don't. Or what other people . . . their judgment on things, on life. Now I try to think for myself. I've changed. I don't believe the priests anymore. I don't believe the Church. I don't believe that message. I prefer trying to figure it out through psychology, through sociology, through other people, how they see it, through my own thoughts.

While utilizing other structures, she declared her independence from them in the following manner:

> When I think about where I am at in my spiritual journey, I have dropped a lot of things. And now . . . see, I don't want to pick up any system . . . I try to think, to have my own thoughts, and not to use other structures to structure my thought.

Pat had looked to traditional religion to guide her to a connection with God and her own soul and so had allowed her life to be directed by it. When she experienced that traditional religion was "doing more harm than good", she reclaimed responsibility for decisions about her life. Pat was passionate in her declaration of independence from its directives:

> It has to be me, and my spirituality, that makes my decisions for me, and that's where I've gotten stronger for it . . . It makes me sick to think that there are so many people out there that do put their trust, they turn their lives over to God as such, through these religious people that are representing God for us on earth, when in fact, no. At one time I went in that direction, and I looked to them for my spirituality, and it never happened. Now when they tell me I should be responsible for this and that, and this is what I should do to be responsible, and all that, and on and on, it's that vicious circle again. I say no, I have to look at me; now what do I feel I have to be responsible for, and what am I willing to do to take this responsibility and what am I going to do with it. It has to come back to me. I have to be strong for me, first. And it doesn't matter so much what they think about it.

Jen tried to express her creative vision of empowering others within the Catholic tradition, but found she had to move beyond that system in order to do so, as it discouraged self-direction:

> It was their right over me that came to be too much. I didn't want that anymore. Why should that happen, when I can do it for myself. Why should I be giving that [self-determination] away, when I can do something with it.

I: *So you discovered you could have a ministry, without associating with the institution.*

> Yes. And even a ministry that to me was founded more on the values than their way of doing ministry . . . Theirs was more authoritarian, like they wanted control. I wanted people to become engaged in the process, and learn to do it for themselves. To even work myself out of a job.

I: *Interesting. So you were training people to be doing all the things that you had been doing.*

> Yes. To be the leaders in the community.

When she left, she felt that she was making a contribution to the religious community by setting an example of competence and creativity outside the religious institution:

> In a way I am doing something indirectly. Just doing what I am doing is proof that it's okay. Just watch me. I am going to do this. It was my process, the way I did it, and it is not necessarily theirs. But it's hard to see that their way is valid. To me, it's not healthy. If they want to live that way, okay. If they want to change it, *they* will have to change it. Maybe I can just do what I need to do. That's all I can do.

When Miriam gained confidence in her ability to direct her own life, she began to express her creativity through a ministry that furthered self-efficacy in others:

> My journey, interestingly enough, isn't even about the ministry. This is the first time in my life that I have had my own apartment. I've always lived with someone else. I had never lived on my own. That has been the reinforcement, the development. So the whole journey is about me learning how to live with me. The spiritual beliefs I teach are about my life, it's who I am. There is no God out there. There is no guru; you are your own guru. As a minister, I just help to open doors, and to facilitate people's journey. That's the fun of it. People ask me, what would you do? What would I do? What I would do is what I would do. What would you do? This is your life, this is your choice.

She experiences her work as creative play, and so Miriam at last is able to "have some fun". Through her work she provides a context which is oriented to individual development. This reflects her belief that it is change in the individual that is the primary source of change within any system:

> I don't think groups, committees, governments change. People, individual people working from their own sphere of life bring about change.

Kayde declared her commitment to expressing her creative vision of individual and institutional transformation in the following comments:

> Where I'm going is, I'm continuing . . . I never let it drop, this business of who I am as a woman, and I guess I want to connect with other women in different stages of their life; I see myself doing that in the Church structure. It's an ongoing thing. And for me it becomes clearer what I have to do. And I have to drop my shyness and my fear of letting that come out. Like you say, once you've come to this truth, this spiritual place, you can't just keep it to yourself, because then it doesn't exist. It has to energize other people, or put forth in some constructive way. So I have made

> great strides, I think personally, by way of working with other people, enabling them; taking responsibility for my own awareness, my thoughts, becoming more aware myself.

Her agreement with Miriam that it is individuals who bring about change is revealed in this statement:

> What is needed is healing of the individuals who are in the hierarchy, and some of that is happening.

However, Kayde has directed her vision of transformation to her religious institution. Her energy is focused on creating change in her religious tradition through continuing to relate with the male hierarchy while speaking and acting from her own centre and her own truth, challenging them when necessary. Her vision is of a radically transformed system, a Church liberated from inequality or sexism in any form; a new creation.

> The energy has to change within the body of the Church. The Church is everybody. And that's women taking responsibility for themselves; and taking responsibility out in community; that's women becoming empowered. So the Church and its celebrants that come out the other end, it will be different. We don't want to just exchange women for men that are in there, or just have half women and half men. What do I want to say here? (Pause) The spirit of the thing will be very different.

All five women were developing their own unique vision and a means of expressing it that was true to where they were at, during this particular time in their lives. Whether remaining within their tradition, or having left it, it was through seeing beyond their traditional religious systems and taking responsibility for their own spiritual development that they gained confidence in their own creative potential.

Because the following comments by Jen bring forth so powerfully the struggle between determination by others and self-determination, between self-sacrifice and self-expression that all the women experienced, though perhaps not to this extent, they are included here as a summary to *The transpersonal realm: Creating*. Jen began by talking about what inspired her to enter religious life, and what she had imagined the spirituality in her tradition to be. She concluded by sharing her realization of how she imaged the Divine:

> It's wanting to be more than what I am. It's wanting to care. Like Christ did, he gave his life so that I could live, and I wanted to be like him. When I left, I wondered whether I had foregone the opportunity to give of myself.

*I: It sounds as if you are finding different ways to do that now.*

> Yes, but feeling selfish doing it, having my own life. That's not as holy as giving my whole life away. That's how I used to think. And it comes back at times, this feeling guilty.

*I: Giving your mind away, too? Giving what you think away?*

> Yeah. Yeah. Even to that point. Saint Therese of Lisieux, her father gave his mind away, he became insane in the end. I don't know if you remember that part?

*I: No, I don't.*

> Her father told her he had given his mind away to God, and he died insane. So you can give your mind away to God. And I did that, and I did say . . . in my own relationship with God, talking with the God I perceived, now I get angry when I see people use God so conveniently as an excuse for not taking charge of our own actions.

*I: Well, for you there were the vows of poverty, chastity, and obedience.*

And obedience is the greatest one of all.

*I: That's giving your mind away?*

Right.

*I: Chastity is giving your sexuality away?*

Yes.

*I: Poverty is giving any sort of individual sense of achievement or identity away, and obedience is giving any self-determination away?*

Right.

*I: My question is, why is that intrinsically spiritual?*

Well, there I would be following more than myself. I am following God. I am being like Christ. Even at the end, in the Garden of Gethsemane, He didn't want to go to the Cross, but He did anyways. So it's obedience to God. And eventually, well I don't want to die, but I will, because that's how reality is, but we can also say that that's how God wants it. We can use God that way. You can have God say a lot of things. So the question it all comes back to, what God do I worship? A God that is going to make me do things that are awful, or a God that wants me to live my life to the fullest? That's what it boils down to. And I believed at one point, that life to the fullest was destroying myself. In a nutshell. Is sacrificing myself, is being like Christ crucified, all the time. Not having any say in the matter. While now, life to the fullest can mean different things. And what does God want of me? I don't know. But does he want me to throw my life away? And what *is* giving my life away? So yes, I did it that way for twenty years. And I could still keep doing it for twenty years. But I don't want to go back there. I don't feel that then I am . . . I also have a conflict with, do you remember the creation story, that we are made, created in the image of God? If I want to know how we are created in God's image, I have to know what God is, how am I like Him? To me God is mind, I mean He has to be a creative mind, and He is *will*. He has a say in things. So if I am created in His

image, if I am like Him, then I need to have a say in things, and I have a creative mind, finally!

*I: Wonderful! How did you get to that?*

My tradition didn't give me that. It supported the idea of obedience.

In contrast to the dependence, passivity and conformity fostered by traditional religion through its structure, imagery, and dogma, these women re-visioned spirituality as personal empowerment, individual responsibility, and service through creative self-expression.

**4. The realm of renewal: Transforming**

This is the realm of personal growth, of a person's path of transformation; their learning, changing, evolving. It has to do with the ongoing development of our self-awareness, relationships, and capacity for creative self-expression. In the conversations, all five women spoke about what oppressed them and what empowered them, what promoted their development and what obstructed it. They talked about what they were seeking from their religious traditions, and what they found. They described what spiritual development was as they experienced it in their own lives. Material relevant to this issue has been presented in the other three themes, but what is being specifically considered here is the extent to which traditional religion has concerned itself with such transformation, and whether it has provided a context in which it can occur. The primary distinction here is between religion as formalism and spirituality as process.

**a) Religion as formalism**

There were three things that all the women were looking for from religion. Though each woman placed her own unique emphasis on these needs, they sought self-worth, relationships of mutual caring, and self-efficacy. They wanted to know that they were good, valuable people; they wanted genuine sharing in their relationships, where they could both nurture and be nurtured; and they wanted empowerment, an awareness of and connection to their own potential so that they could take responsibility for their own lives and contribute creatively to their communities. They came into conflict with traditional religion when they realized that it blocked authentic relating, obstructed their self-development, and concerned itself with what was irrelevant to spiritual experience.

**Blocks authentic relating:** The women experienced that religion did not promote relationships that were open and genuine because of its undue emphasis on hierarchy. As well, its fixation on rules and moralism tended to create an atmosphere of judgmentalism and hypocrisy. Many of their statements about these issues are included in earlier themes. The comments here describe their experience that the Church, in general, is not relational.

Monique was very pointed in her observations of the hypocrisy around relationships in the Church:

> It is very idealistic, but in practise it's not what it says it is. It tells you to love, but there's not much love there . . . Lately, all the priests with sexual abuse . . . And if the Church does that to the supposed leaders, and I see them as men who are fake, whose sermons are meaningless -- that's the failings I see.

Also:

> What kept me in the Church for a long time was I thought there was humanity and community in the Church. And then I began to see lots of instances where it wasn't there. And I met people outside the Church who were kinder, more supportive, more human.

Monique thought that the Catholic Church failed to provide an example of caring and community through its own preoccupation with hierarchy and power:

> The power trips, the structure of the Church itself, the hierarchy, the bureaucracy in the Vatican, and there had been the Vatican Council . . . tried to give the message that it was a power structure rather than a structure that fostered community.

Pat spoke of her personal experience of needing support from her religious community, and finding rejection instead. As a result of the hypocrisy she saw, Pat lost her faith in a loving God:

> I felt not belonging. Even though I went I did not feel that I belonged, I did not feel comfortable. Because of society putting the pressure on, in the sense of making fun of, criticizing, basically emotionally and verbally. I felt that I was looked down on because I was poor, because I had problems in my home life . . . Those people around me didn't give me the support, there was no support . . . I felt God turned on us. It wasn't really God who did, it was his people. They were supposed to be spiritual, but I look at it today, and I say no, they were not. So I stopped believing in God, I shut it out . . . I didn't feel good about God.

At several challenging and stressful times in her life, when she very much required support from her church, Kayde did not receive it. She was deeply hurt, crushed by the callous treatment she received from the clergy instead:

> The Church really fell by the wayside at times when I think relationship and community are key . . . So I guess I expected people to be there for me. When I couldn't articulate what was happening. So that's a big let down. What's this great big institution supposed to be doing, anyway?

Through these experiences she concluded that the Church was fake. The anger she felt at this hypocrisy generated the seed that is now flowering in her work to transform her tradition:

> And why I am *still* associated with my tradition. I won't leave it, because I believe that my experience is extremely important . . . and I see my role as an educator there.

One of the things Kayde is seeking to change is the way in which the present religious service is conducted, which she thinks blocks feelings of connectedness and community:

> When I sit in a church service, there's no spirituality in it. It's a relational thing. The Church gets in the way of that sense of spirituality. The Church is very narrow.

Jen conveyed the frustration she felt with the hypocrisy in her religious tradition, with respect to the constraints it placed on developing a sense of community, by describing an incident in which she mingled with a group of people at a social gathering and was later reprimanded by her religious community:

> You remember how Jesus was judged, because he was with people of lower status than others. People couldn't understand how he could be with tax collectors, and all these other people. That's the image that came to me. If I would be like Jesus I would be with the people He loved, He created. So I stood up and joined the celebration. When I got home, I got it. You don't do that! I was an outcast for awhile. I really wanted to belong. But I couldn't really

> belong anyway on those terms. So that was the conflict. Here they were preaching this gospel of Christ, and I did say, like, "How come?" Oh, what a mess! I don't know how I ever came through all of that.

She gave examples of how the Church, rather than bringing people together, creates divisions among them:

> The Church doesn't want to change. The Church doesn't accept woman as equal to man. And it doesn't accept that there are changes in relationships. Why put a label on someone, and say that person can't belong because of a divorce? Those things happen, and those people are labeled and stigmatized because of that. There is a lot of judging in the Church. And even the laws to go to communion. Not everyone is welcome at the communion table. You judge the person by the church that they belong to. Are we going to be numbered in heaven, and segregated according to particular congregations? It is sad, to make those kinds of walls between people. We create divisions. We create wars. In the name of Christ, how many people have been killed? And it's still going on.

At another point in our conversations, Jen provided one explanation for how relationships become artificial as a result of religious conditioning. She talked about how she thought the attitude to love promoted by the Church actually prevents genuine communication and true relating. Although considered a superior form of loving, it leads to relationships that are superficial and insincere. Any connection to the individual gets lost:

> It's more charitable to love non-sexually than sexually. There's no mutuality in that kind of love, though. But it's more pure. But this also can be misused. Okay, I love you not because of you, but because of charity. I love because of God. I am loving in God's name . . . I can not like you, but I have to love you. But then that's real love. That's called love.

*I: It sounds somewhat like an intellectualization.*

> Yes. It is. It's going beyond any kind of attraction, of like and dislike. Of the concrete person. In a sense it can be very selfish, too. You can protect yourself immensely by not becoming very close to people. If I am telling you that I love you because of God, that loves you, then I don't have to invest any kind of *me* in it, really. There is a lot of separation in that kind of stance. So in a sense, it protects me too, doesn't it? But then you can never know me, and I can never know you, as a person.

Jen's discontent with the kind of relationships she experienced in her tradition was a major factor in her decision to leave it.

Monique also thought the attitude to love that the Church encourages actually interferes with true relating. Her experience of the consequences of "loving like a mother" contradict the Pope's proclamation that only through "giving love to others" will women "find fulfillment". To the extent that the Church conditions women into traditional gender roles, with women being assigned the responsibility for loving, its message serves only to obstruct authentic communion among people:

> In my own spirituality, I don't know if it was love itself, or just the concept of love, but it was love that did drive me. When I analyzed the way I had loved . . . one time I did that in a counseling session . . . That was difficult, because I saw how I had loved, and it's not the way I felt that I had wanted. I hadn't really loved, I had . . . I had loved like a mother, but I hadn't really had loving relationships . . . I had always been too concerned with myself giving, with the giving part. And I don't know if I really related in a healthy way. It wasn't reciprocal, it wasn't sharing, equality.

**Obstructs self-development:** The women experienced that their religious traditions did not provide the guidance they needed to go beyond the personal limitations in which they found themselves. They were not encouraged to develop a sense of their own value and capacity for creative activity. To the

contrary, they experienced that dependency and passivity were promoted through the authoritarianism in their traditions. They learned that what was expected and required of them was obedience, following the rules of their traditions. As a result of their religion's claims to be the exclusive custodians of spiritual truth, the women experienced no liberation of their hearts or minds, their imaginations or their feelings. These were channeled in "appropriate" ways according to the dogma, imagery, and moral rules sanctioned by their traditions. Many of their comments about these issues are presented in the first three themes. Included here are additional comments revealing the frustration the women felt with their religious traditions for either not providing a context for self-development, or else thwarting it.

When I asked Miriam the question, "Did your tradition provide a structure where you could feel a sense of your personal power?", she replied:

> No, no sense of it at all. I cannot begin to describe, the more we are talking about it, that life was this tight compartment. There was no development in my mind and heart of what I could do.

When asked if her tradition gave her the sense that she could develop spiritually, Miriam's response indicated the feelings of helplessness it left her with instead:

> The power of the Divine ideal was established, and yet it never gave me the sense that I had to cultivate it, develop it, care for it, however I want that to be for myself. So the message was, the possibility is there, but there is no way you can ever get to it, so, like, forget it. It was the message of disillusionment. It's like it was holding out the carrot for bait, and yet not giving it. You know what comes to my mind, the good lord giveth, and the good lord taketh away. That was the message. So now you see it, now you don't. What is this mystical, fragmented, like here I am no I'm

> not. It was related in my own mind to, that has to be because, oh oh, that's because I'm being good or bad. Very much duality. Good, bad, right, wrong . . . That carrot was the instinctive urge that God is love, God is good, if I can only find a way to that. So the very elusiveness. Which God certainly is, if you want to make God elusive it is, you know. Or mysterious.

The way in which religion tends to limit a person's vision of what spirituality is was of particular concern to Jen. She suggested that when religious institutions claim to hold an exclusive yet universal revelation, they encourage people to identify spirituality with religion. Consequently, people lose touch with their own spiritual truth, and neglect to develop their own spiritual vision:

> A lot of religious institutions want to bring into the world what spirituality is, and they do promote some values, but at one point they can become an obstacle to them, because the symbol hides the real meaning of what spirituality is. It's not just narrow. So that's how I sorted it out for myself. I had seen spirituality within a very narrow structure. To me, religion was it.

It was through leaving her tradition that she could open herself to further development. She continued:

> And now that I was out of it, I could expand what my spirituality was.

Jen felt that the Catholic tradition not only limited people's vision, it actually opposed their development. When she came to this conclusion, she decided that she had to leave the Church:

> *I: At some point, you decided that you could not remain within your tradition to accomplish what you needed to. What was that?*
>
> That I could be recognized that I was a responsible person, having a say . . . or that even changes could be possible.

Also:

> That's what is scary about the Church. Is that when people do want to take responsibility in the Church, but it is crushed all the time, that is what is scary.

*I: What's frightening about that?*

> Well, then people stop growing. If they are told, "No, or you will have to leave", then hopefully they will be healthy enough to leave, and not stay in there as sheep.

Pat described how she lost a sense of her own spirituality through her connection to her religious tradition. As a result of negative experiences with the Church, Pat "abandoned God", closed off her inner self, shut down emotionally. A part of her stopped developing:

> The inner child I got in touch with was a very frightened child, one who would not allow herself to be vulnerable to anything, that she had to be in control of everything, entire situations in life. She was the power, all those years, when in fact she had no power, whatsoever. She lost her power when she lost her spirituality. So until that came back, the piece of me that was not growing, that was not living, was put there.

Kayde compared the constraints on personal development that came with membership in her church with being in a harness:

> And so there was that, that was doing what I was told, following authority, following the rules. And when I was out of that harness, and could get away, I was who I was. Because in that harness you never got anywhere.

She spoke about how her spiritual development was inhibited by her tradition through the rigidity of its rules, and the meaninglessness of its rituals:

> There was this marvelous, whole piece of myself, it was my spirituality, that they didn't nurture. I didn't fit in there. I could go and sing all these little songs and dances, go through the little ritual, and listen to the stories associated with the scriptures. They weren't talking about what I was experiencing. There was no meaning. They were talking about little rules and regulations that had no scope for change, that had no room for questioning, that had no options.

Her conclusion that the Church hindered a person's self-efficacy was one of Monique's primary criticisms of her tradition:

> I think it's the powerlessness that's the weakness of . . . it takes away power from people. And it's supposed to empower people, and it does the opposite.

She referred to her own experience:

> I felt religious life was supposed to help a person grow, and I felt at the end there that they didn't want me to grow, and they even put me down.

For Miriam, the authoritarianism in traditional religion was a fundamental hypocrisy:

> It's like religious tradition. To browbeat people, and keep them in your power through fear and intimidation, is for me essentially a denial of God.

For Jen, it was antithetical to the true spirit of Christ:

> For them [traditional religion] Christ is not the liberator. They are afraid of that, because what might it do to the Church. It is better to have conformity, people following, than to have people stand up and say what they think. It's rocking the boat, it's going against the status quo, it's changing things. There is a strong push not to change things.

All of the women had looked to their traditions to help them become stronger, more capable people. Their actual experience was that traditional religion was an impediment to their own development, maintaining its own power and influence through controlling them.

**Irrelevant concerns:** All of the women experienced in one way or another that much of religion was simply empty formalism. It wasn't meaningful to them, and didn't touch their lives in any significant way. It focused on trivialities or irrelevancies.

**Meaninglessness:** For Kayde the spirit, the life, was missing from her tradition:

> There was no, what do I want to say . . . I want to use the Hebrew word *ru'ach*, which is experience, or air, or anything that breathed in and out. . . There was no life. There was nothing tangible.

The imagery was irrelevant to women:

> None of the other images had any significance for women; there was nothing you could relate to as a woman. There were suits of armour! Ride on Christian soldiers, you know that kind of magnificence. It was empty.

Speaking of the disconnection between women's experiences and the concerns of traditional religion she said:

> Their spirituality is all this huge big thing over here. And the little business of the Church goes along there.

There was no connection to the realities of daily living, which Kayde found did exist in other approaches:

> In my involvement with women's spirituality, which is very spiritual, there is honouring of that whole side of healing and

> spiritual growth, and the natural, earthy environmental things -- dealing with life and death.

Like Kayde, Monique found that she was at odds with her tradition because of her vision, though from a different perspective, of the immanence of the Divine:

> I realized that my way of seeing Christianity was that Christ was in the world; that my community was seeing it as Christ out of the world, above the world.

She also found that the religious service in her tradition failed to make any meaningful connection to her experience:

> When I think about the sermons I listened to, that's all it is. An intellectual exercise. Some priests are better than others at talking, and can bridge the gap between feelings and dogma, or Bible readings. Others don't. So I wonder about those that don't, what kind of life they have inside. (Pause) I think it shouldn't be just thinking, but it can become just thinking.

Pat also experienced that religion was irrelevant to spiritual experience. She felt it had become 'just talking', and she found that the God-talk in her tradition was simply words without meaning because the words did not come to life, "become flesh", in her community:

> Spirituality and God were just words I didn't understand, because I still did not have any feeling toward God; there was nothing there. They were words, but they weren't real, it wasn't real, it was just a name, God, but it was not real and all that was said about God was not real, because it was words, and these words weren't happening in my life. What was real in my life was what I was seeing and feeling and it certainly wasn't that God was taking care of anyone in our lives.

For Pat, spirituality was very much connected with "nature and the wonderful things we see through our own eyes". When she was a child, her sense of communion with what was divine was evoked by the beauty of nature. Through difficult experiences in her life, and as a result of religious conditioning, she lost touch with that sense of divine presence in the world. It was many years later before she regained a sense of connection with the divine presence in the world and in herself. This occurred while she was sitting in a park. The beauty of nature that surrounded her evoked an ecstatic spiritual experience that lasted for several hours, and made her aware of what she had lost. As a result, she set out to begin a process of healing that included the workshop in which she gained further insights and a renewed sense of her innate spirituality. She realized a more intimate sense of the Divine by going beyond the focus promoted by her church, and honouring her own life and experience:

> I've discovered now, I refer to him [God] as He, and I speak of him as male, but when I went away and had done some thinking and I came back here today, I realize spirituality has nothing to do with churches or anything, it's nature and beauty, it has nothing to do with books, more to do with feelings, a spiritual feeling about oneself, a sense of being connected to life, of not being alone.

The conflict between rules and values was the way in which Jen described her experience that Catholicism tended to focus on what was irrelevant to spirituality:

> What did I promise to the Church? Promise to live according to a certain value system that I found out was to live according to rules set. That's when conflicts happen. There's a dissonance between the value, and the way we are told to live it. I like using the Gospel, where Jesus says Sunday is for man, not man for Sunday.

> But often it is the other way around, where we have to follow the rule because it is the rule, not because it is useful.

And:

> A lot of the rules stop people from being real.

**Focus on external appearances:** When in response to Kayde's comments I asked her what she thought drew people to church when it seemed meaningless, she spoke of the importance of keeping up social appearances:

> It didn't look good if you didn't, not having a relationship with the Church. . .yeah, I think it looks good. . . And I don't have the same attitude about it looking good now, but I was led to believe that if you weren't associated with the Church, there was something wrong with you!

In Miriam's tradition, there was also an emphasis on external appearances:

> I got the message of the importance of the outer; look good. Conform. there was a certain element of the fear of God, too. That if you don't behave, you will suffer.

And:

> Do all the expected things, show up and look good, fit in that picture. I was sure that God was 'out there', definitely.

Pat told of how she had noticed even as a child that as far as attitudes to women were concerned, it was the external that counted:

> The people that were there in church, most of them were only there in body, not in spirit. They were verbally comforting sometimes, but I didn't really feel it from them. Some women had more of an inner beauty. But that wasn't really recognized in the Church, I felt. I would say that women were not looked upon as being beautiful unless it was a physical beauty. And I felt as a child that this was how people thought about women.

Miriam also criticized her tradition for the extent to which it was concerned with its own expansion rather than the inner life of its members:

> I also had the concept handed to me in those years, and I guess still, money was a big thing in the Jewish faith. When you join the Church, it really wasn't about spirituality and God, it was about how much are you prepared to donate on a consistent basis to the building fund, because we have to grow and we have to expand, and it is you that are going to do it. So I drew some conclusions about how crass, you know and how unfeeling, to put everything about God in terms of money. I built up a case for why as a woman or as a human being, there was no room for God. God was about other things.

Through its concern for hierarchy and conformity to roles, consolidating power through authoritarianism, and focusing on externals, traditional religion did not meet these women's needs for belonging and meaning, nor did it provide a context that nurtured self-awareness and self-development.

**b) Spirituality as process**

In the previous three themes, the women's experience of spirituality has been discussed under the topics self-affirmation, self-assertion and self-determination. From the stories they shared about their conflict with traditional religion it was possible to trace a process of transformation that led from traditional religious conditioning to the development of this experience of their own spirituality. In the text that follows, their comments on transformation are presented within sections that deal with awareness, anger, crisis, supportive community, God within, and process as resolution.

These women experienced that their religious traditions emphasized the importance of the outer: outer appearances, rules of behaviour, and conformity

to traditional roles. God was "out there" in the form of Church, clergy, or husband, and God was male. When the Spirit was experienced as within, it was in the form of a male image, or as the voices of the priests and the words of the Bible. Men were considered to be the leaders and the authorities. Women were expected to submit to their opinions and directives, and were discouraged from questioning their traditions or sharing their perspectives on their religions. Through this conditioning into dependence and passivity, coupled with the misogyny pervasive in traditional religion that associates women with flesh, sin and 'The Fall', on one hand, and men with mind, spirit and redemption, on the other hand, the women lost a sense of their innate spirituality. They lacked a stable sense of identity and self-worth, and lost confidence in their capacity for autonomy and creative action in the world.

Awareness: Through various painful experiences, the false security of dependence on an external God, of whatever form, was shattered. They discovered that even though they were conforming to the roles and behaviours deemed appropriate for women by traditional religion, their lives were not working. They experienced abandonment or abuse, or realized that they were being oppressed in various ways. The women began to see that the messages they received from traditional religion about who they were and how they should behave were both false and harmful, resulting in self-alienation, subordination, and inauthentic relationships. When they realized that they had been seeking approval from, and trying to meet the expectations of a system that conditioned them into dependency, and then oppressed or exploited them, they were profoundly angry. Their conflict with traditional religion began with a growing

awareness of the way it conditioned their thoughts and feelings, and was followed by anger and rebellion against this conditioning. Anger came to be valued as fuel for change.

**Anger:** Comments about anger have been included in other themes. Several will be repeated here along with additional ones that reveal the women's sense that anger generated energy for transformation.

Monique was angry with her tradition primarily because she felt that it had encouraged dependency and immaturity. "I realized that I was very, very angry, because I felt that I had stayed as a child, having to confess to a man."

Pat's anger at the Church was over the discrepancy between its messages of a kind and loving God, and the rejection and abuse she experienced and observed.

> I abandoned God, because he wasn't taking care of us . . . And at that time I didn't know that I did that. I was just very angry with Him, and just said there is no God, there can't be a God when this happens.

Although at one time Pat shut down emotionally as a way of dealing with her anger, when her husband became physically abusive with her, her anger allowed her to take "a giant step out of the vicious circle that has been created by society, and functioning beliefs, and religion".

Kayde was angry with her Church for the way she had been personally treated by the clergy when she needed support: "It was at that point on that I was extremely angry. And I was not only angry about the way I thought I was being treated, but I became aware of how I *had* been treated, *all along*". She also felt very angry at the Church's negation of women's spirituality:

> I'm angry. I'm extremely angry. Because that whole spiritual part of me, as a woman, is denied, it's not acknowledged. It's "yes, but".

Acknowledging her anger, she could see its value, and begin to use it constructively. "The anger is there. And I think the anger is the energy I experience in making changes."

Jen was furious at her conditioning into submission and passivity as something holy, and at the way her energy and creativity had been squelched as a result. The depth of her anger at the Church is revealed in the following exchange:

> *I: This brings up for me, your statement that you are made in the image of God, and that you have a creative mind, and that you should have a will. Then I have to ask you about women in the Church.*
>
> Well, you can ask me how I felt when I left. If this was okay, the way I was thinking now, that to be created in God's image is to be able to use those same powers as God, then everything that I was told was wrong, and I was going to destroy it. Bang! I had this big cannon in my mind, and I was going to blast it! (Laughter) I had that really strong. That's why I went into therapy, and I told the counselor that.

For all of the women, anger motivated them to explore the source of their suffering, develop greater self-awareness, and take the necessary steps to challenge oppressive structures and move toward self-determination. As Miriam said, "That anger can be positive. It can move us out of conditioning".

Although anger became fuel for transformation, the key that allowed the women to transcend their traditional religious systems was their decision to value and affirm themselves. Rather than passively accepting injustice and

subjugation, they made a decision to take responsibility for directing their own lives. This was a challenging process, and required courage, commitment, and sustained effort, as there were critical times during their growing disillusionment with their traditions when they experienced intense suffering; sorrow, terror and emptiness.

Crisis: When Pat felt rejected by, and therefore rejected in turn the God of her tradition, she felt extreme fear and emptiness: "I was afraid, terribly afraid, terrified, to the point that I was terrified to show anything other than a physical being, and I mean just physical being without any characteristics of any sort . . . just really alone, feeling scared and frightened and really cold".

Jen also had experienced intense fear and sorrow as part of her process: "I've taken risks, and I've cried, and I've been terrified, I've been in pain".

As she began to re-evaluate her beliefs, and come to terms with the changes she felt were necessary in her life, there were times when Monique was desolate:

> In that process . . . it was devastating, at one point, really. From believing, from my life being totally centred on Christ, and then realizing that maybe Christ was not real, that maybe all this wasn't true . . . I remember emotionally how I felt. I felt devastated. I had invested a lot of energy in that. I had believed that for so long. I was a sister, I had a role, it had made me who I was at that point, and I guess part of what devastated me was that I would have to leave all that, and who was I now? I would have to start all over, what was going to happen to me? That's probably when I started seeing . . . trying to look at who I was, really.

The dissolution of concepts and values that had once structured her life and provided it with meaning was so painful that at one point Monique feared that she would literally "go crazy":

> After I was completely disillusioned, I did try to tell some people my insights. And I wasn't very successful. At the same time, I didn't want to disillusion them, I was afraid of disillusioning them, because I was still hurting . . . Because it did hurt a lot, because it's, it could have . . . I think I could have become crazy . . . it could have gone either way.

Although this process was difficult, and she went through a period of terrible emptiness, she gained a greater sense of freedom that was very precious to her:

> It was difficult to change meaning, before I . . . there was a disintegration, there was a point where there was nothing and that felt terrible. But now, it's a freeing, I feel freer. I don't have all this guilt that I am carrying around. I don't feel guilty, anymore, for who I am.

What kept Monique from "breaking apart" was her growing sense of the Divine within herself.

Kayde talked about the pain that accompanied her disillusionment with traditional religion. What kept her from being devastated by this experience was that she was able to affirm herself and to get in touch with a sense of her inner strength:

> I looked upon those men [clergy] as being weird. I got a clearer sense of myself, and my strength. I thought, I haven't done anything wrong. But it really hurt, because I was not supported. And I was disillusioned. And in an awful hurry I learned a lot about what's wrong with the Church, like, you are not real! I'm being sold a bill of goods that doesn't exist. And though there was a lot of pain around that, I didn't fall apart. It was a good thing that I am a strong woman. I realized that then . . . It was my sense of strength as a woman valuing myself, that I wasn't devastated.

In her progress towards self-determination and a sense of her spiritual identity, Miriam spoke of feeling desperate for a sense of self-worth and self-

efficacy. She felt that without it, she probably couldn't continue to live. She describes how she felt when she was told that she was a valuable person, and had reserves of inner strength that it was her responsibility to access:

> It was what I had always wanted. It was even more desperate than that. It was what I needed to live, probably, otherwise I wouldn't be able to live, if I thought my whole life had to be predicated upon somebody out there being, you know, a power in my life, either giving to me, or taking away from me.

She also spoke of the deep pain and the sorrow she felt as she began to see that the traditional feminine role promoted by religion as the means for women's sanctity and fulfillment was neither liberating nor fulfilling, and in fact alienated her from a sense of her spirituality, her "sense of identity as a woman expressing life":

> It was painful to know that even though I was conforming according to what women were supposed to do, marriage, kids, creating a home, that didn't seem to do it; to say, I can't conceive of my life continuing in this direction.

And:

> So for me it stimulated the desire, somewhere I guess at a very deep subconscious level, to find another way. So if I were to say what stimulated my journey to my own spiritual identity, my sense of identity as a woman expressing life, then I would say the pain of all that, led to that something inside me that said there is more, now just be willing to go through whatever it is to discover what that might be.

In their commitment to transformation, all five women were, in Miriam's words, "willing to go through whatever it is to discover what that might be". Gradually, they were able to move beyond the critical times of despair, terror, and emptiness. Two things that were of particular importance in facilitating and

sustaining their development were a supportive community, and a sense of the Divine within themselves.

**Supportive community:** The women were helped by people who were genuinely present to them and who encouraged their growing autonomy, including friends, fellow participants in workshops or support groups, and various teachers and guides. All of the women, without exception, sought professional counseling at some point in their process, and considered it to have played a very important part in their healing and transformation.

Jen found support from both students and friends:

> When came the time I was given responsibility by the people I was teaching, then I regained some of that sense of self, that I could make decisions.

And:

> To come back from that state, to taking on responsibility, I was extremely scared . . . like I needed a lot of approval. Like people saying, "you're doing great, keep on".

She felt she had been helped by a wide range of experiences, and a number of people with very different beliefs. It was Jen's experience that her tradition was closed to dialogue and opposed to change. However, she gave credit to some people in her religious community for whatever support she did receive from her tradition:

> *I: Who helped you on this journey?*
>
> Well, even the congregation itself, when they saw how stressed I was by the situation, they sent me to study. And it was a psychology course that made me see a different way of looking at myself. So I can say that they did do something for me. You see,

> it's not black and white there, either. And then different books, I would read a lot. And going to workshops - I went to a journal workshop, a dream workshop. And, a priest in the diocese who gave me an idea of what liberation theology was. That it wasn't necessarily Christ's message that I had believed. And also an atheistic man, who didn't believe in God at all, who made me see the world in a completely different way. Who reversed all of my beliefs, and I had to re-evaluate all of what I was believing. What was my belief system? And was it necessarily something that was set in stone, or was there a place for changes in that structure?

For Monique, support came primarily from people who had never been part of her tradition, or who had left it:

> There were these people in my life, the ones that were supposedly religious, were hurting me a lot, were not understanding, were not giving me support, while this other person did not believe at all, and he helped me through this difficult passage in my life. . . But when I, like being an atheist, I had learnt as I was growing up that that was terrible. Those were really bad, bad people. And I found out they weren't. And then I realized what faith really was.

And:

> *I: When you realized you had to go your own way, how did you sum up your experience, and your need to make a change?*
>
> I went to counseling. And I chose a female counselor who had been a nun, and wasn't, anymore, and I did it because I thought, if she can do it, she can help me get through this, and she did. . . A lot of issues and hurts were being looked at with her, but at the same time, I didn't want counseling that much anymore. So at the end, she empowered me, she told me I could do it.

When Monique felt ready to continue her process of healing on her own, she was encouraged to do so.

Miriam spoke about the support that was helpful for her:

> It was through counseling that the door opened for me. That was the catalyst for self-discovery.

While counseling provided an initial context for self-exploration and for accessing personal resources, it was through a friend that she came into contact with an alternative church, where she found ongoing support in a community that was in harmony with the psychological, self-responsible orientation she had found helpful in counseling.

It was through therapy that Kayde became aware of her dissociation: "I came to see just how separated I was, that I lived two lives, really". It was through connecting with other women, however, that she found ongoing support for her development:

> The women came into my life, that's where I have grown, and honoured that spiritual side of myself with them.

She spoke about the importance that sharing experiences with them had for her process:

> It was going through the struggle with other women who were also trying to say, hey, I'm visible, and don't treat me in a way that I'm not here. What I have to say is really important. What women have to say is really important. So we began to share together, and that is really how whatever my journey has been came into focus.

Pat found as well, that sharing her experience with other women was particularly helpful. However, she was also grateful to those men who had listened to her, and been helpful when she was very much in need of support:

> Those people who have helped me get to where I am, are women. They were women who shared with me what was in their hearts,

> and that is what helped me feel so spiritually strong, being able to share what is in my heart. That made me feel really thankful, for the goodness inside. But when I look back, I also have several men to thank; I was in that group, and there were two men who stayed behind to talk to me after everyone else had disappeared. There were two males, and I was crying, and I didn't think they understood. I had a wall there, but they were very supportive, and I also have them to thank.

**God Within:** As the women affirmed themselves, and made the transition from allowing their lives to be determined by others to self-determination, their sense of the Divine changed. Rather than thinking of God as 'out there', or as mediated by males, the women began to experience the presence of the Divine within themselves. This was healing and empowering. It was both a consequence of their commitment to transformation, and what enabled them to take responsibility for their own development. It gave them the sense that they did not always have to obey, or try to please, or seek approval from outer authorities. It provided them with a feeling of inner strength and peace that allowed them to continue learning and developing, and working to create contexts in which others could do the same.

In the following excerpt from my conversations with Monique, she gives a beautiful description of the evolution of her sense of the Divine, from God without to God within. It was this sense that allowed her to "not break apart" during her conflict with traditional religion:

*I: What is spirituality?*

> For me, for so long, it was listening to the Spirit, who was up there, who would talk inside of me, though. And now I am not sure that there is a spirit, that God exists. So then, if it doesn't exist . . . That was my definition of spirituality, was listening to the Spirit.

> And now that that spirit might not be existing, what happens to spirituality? See, my spirituality changed. I grew in it, I changed, and at one point it changed: not having God out there, but God inside of me. So that really helped me to not break apart. . . That really made the link for me, that the Spirit I was really needing to listen to, was, basically, myself.

*I: Prior to that, what spirit had you been listening to?*

> God, the Holy Spirit, whoever that was. The spirit that my tradition had given me. And the voices I was hearing inside of me were the voices that the priests had given me, and the reading I was doing, and the Bible.

For Pat, spirituality involved becoming reconnected to her inner self. Though she had spoken of God as He, she came to think of God as being genderless, and both a higher power, and the spirit within her:

> Though I might refer to God as He or Him, if I was to sit down and try and intellectualize it or think about it, my spirituality has nothing to do with, and it makes no difference to me whether it's male or female or what it is, it's a spirit within me that has nothing to do with being male or female or anything. And thinking back to when I got in touch with my spirituality, it's a higher power, a spirit within me.

As Pat's sense of spirituality changed and developed, she came to believe that not only was spirituality a sense of the Divine within oneself, it was also innate. She found herself in conflict with traditional religion because she thought that it prevented people from knowing and experiencing this:

> I've come to the belief now that it's something you are born with, it's a spiritual thing that you are born with, and what you learn about spirituality and religion is from your role models or people around you and it may not be the same thing. We are born with spirituality; this is a gift that God has given me, that I was never aware of. I didn't know I had it until recently. It was a gift I was

> born with, no matter what kind of family I was born to. I didn't recognize it, or was not aware of it, because of the belief system and society and the family, and everybody else's beliefs. It's got to come from, you've got to get in here, and look in here [pointing to her heart].

For Jen, discovering that she was made in the image of God meant that she had a will and a creative mind, and that she needed "to have a say in things". This freed her to leave her religious tradition, and follow her inner spiritual guidance:

> Just before leaving the congregation, I told the Mother Superior, "You know, I am not following you, or anything that you have preached. I am following who I am. I am leaving because I am following something deep inside of me, not something outside of me".

Kayde spoke about her sense of God within in the following way:

> Who I am inside, as far as God is concerned, . . . that's my God-part you are talking about, and it's *feminine* . . . it isn't really feminine, but then it was.

As she described how her sense of spirituality was developing, she spoke of being able to attune herself to an inner stillness:

> I think what's beginning to change, not that God is a woman, but being in touch with *me*, and it's my comfort zone now, and when I get into a crisis, and I can get into that still place. It's inside now.

Miriam also described her experience of God within as being able to attune herself to an inner sense of Divine presence. This had been missing in her experience of traditional religion:

> There was never that feeling of a sense of presence, of the presence of God, like a feeling I have subsequently enjoyed, where there is a

> real presence, a comfort, that I can go to. And even in the midst of fears, or despair, I can really create that within myself.

Although all five women came to an experience of God within, their sense of the Divine was not limited to an inner experience. As Kayde said, "Now it's inside and out and around me, the experience I have". For Pat, the Divine was also in nature, and beauty, and genuine communion among people:

> I think that without any kind of denominations, that it would have been most wonderful, as children, to just go somewhere, by a river, or under a tree, or in a back yard, and sing Jesus loves me, or anything, and be there together and feel it, no matter what colours we were, anything about us, and that to me is spirituality and religion. But you don't get that.

For Miriam, the Divine was manifest in a prosperous and loving existence. For Jen, it was expressed through being broad-minded and open-hearted:

> I think that is the danger within the Church, that we want to narrow it [spirituality] too much. We are not accepting to broaden and expand it. And that's what I am trying to do more and more, to expand my own visions.

For Monique, the Divine was manifest in the process of life itself, through her discovery that spiritual insight resulted from living authentically. Speaking of the truth she had gained from her spiritual journey, she referred to the song "Amazing Grace". When I suggested that this was an affirmation of faith, she corrected me, and said: "Of *life*. Of life". Because this was her expression of how she is coming to terms with her conflict with religious tradition, I have included our dialogue in the following section.

For all the women, moving from a sense of God without to an experience of God within was a fundamental aspect of their process of transformation, and

enabled them to progress from self-alienation to self-affirmation, from subordination to self-assertion, and from determination by others to self-determination.

**Process as resolution:** Along with their realization that transformation is ongoing, the women came to view spirituality in a very different light than that presented to them by their traditions. This new sense of spirituality was what was allowing them to resolve their conflict with traditional religion, each in her own particular way. Spirituality came to be considered in terms of process rather than content. Being open to life and to change became more valid than conforming to approved patterns of behaviour, or striving to achieve an ideal of female perfection based on self-negation. In contrasting their perception of spirituality as process with traditional religious ideas, self-awareness, self-nurture and self-expression takes precedence over self-repression; being able to let go of dogmatic ways of thinking, believing and behaving and being able to bear emptiness and 'not knowing' takes precedence over clinging to the illusory security of a faith relationship to religious 'authority' that one imagines possesses, exclusively, the 'absolute truth', learning from the truth within a multiplicity of perspectives takes precedence over attempts to convert others to one's own tradition; service to others becomes sharing what one has to give out of a positive sense of individuality and personal resources, rather than self-sacrifice or a duty imposed by traditional roles; self-determination and personal responsibility for one's own salvation, liberation, transformation takes precedence over the expectation that someone or something else can or will do this for us.

For Pat, spirituality as process involved recognizing her human imperfection, and being willing to grow and learn from the inevitable mistakes. She realized that no one else was perfect, either, and imagined that perhaps even God was "in process". What gave her the strength to transcend the "vicious circle" of traditional conditioning that resulted in self-alienation and subordination was her decision to genuinely love herself. When she did this, she found herself sharing that love with others. Although she regretted that she had not come to value herself earlier in her life, she was able to give meaning to the pain that she had experienced. She felt that she had learned from it, and grown stronger, more compassionate, and more able to contribute to others as a result:

> There are many issues behind this inner child that I have to deal with; and I know that, but I know because I am in touch with my spirituality, and I know I will probably make lots of mistakes because I am not perfect, and no one is, nor perhaps when I deal with God, maybe I will look back at it and say, you know, God isn't perfect either, because if it were perfect, then this would have happened at a better time in my life, when I was younger, before I had children, so that the love I have for myself and others could be given, and I'm just getting to that now. But I've stepped out of the circle, I've taken a giant step out of that vicious circle that has been created by society, and functioning beliefs, and religion. . . So I feel very fortunate because I feel I am a better and much stronger person for what I have gone through in life. I have a lot to give because of where I have been in life. That sounds silly to someone outside, maybe, but I think it's given me compassion for other people. I had to hit my bottom line, which was the physical. Once my husband became physical with me, that was my bottom line with tolerating such nonsense. Spirituality was stepping out of that vicious circle. I had to say no, this is wrong, this is not acceptable, and I'm not going to allow myself to be where my mom is because of the fact that she didn't love herself enough, or couldn't find it in herself to love herself enough to get out, but I am going to do something, so I made that decision.

Jen experienced that the forms and the rules of her tradition were antithetical to spirituality as process. She spoke of the need for a context in which people could be authentic, develop their creativity, and feel free to make mistakes:

> *I: Could you say more about how that* [the rules of her tradition] *gets in the way of spirituality?*
>
> Well, it depends on what you think spirituality is. If I think spirituality is allowing people to be more creative, and even make mistakes, otherwise. . . That's what I think spirituality should be doing, is giving you room, and space to be yourself, and to be creative, and to even make mistakes. And if that situation I am in doesn't approve of that, doesn't think that's what spirituality is, then I am in the wrong place. (Laughter)

For Jen, thinking, questioning, expressing herself, and learning from other viewpoints all became intimately part of her experience of spirituality. Knowing herself as being-in-process gave her a sense of her own potential. She felt stronger within herself, and this allowed her to be more open to relationships, and more open to life:

> My spirituality is to try and think things through, to really use my brain to the fullest, to try things new, to risk, to create, as much as I can, to believe in who I am as someone with a lot of potential . . . To be able to accept receiving and giving. But for a long time, I thought I was alone, believing that I had to make my own way alone. And that is not true. I am becoming stronger, I think, in that sense. You know, I feel way more empowered. I've taken risks and I've cried, and I've been terrified, I've been in pain. Before, I would shut out that pain, but now, I don't like it, but it means that I'm alive . . . When it hurts, I can say it now, and not just suffer it passively. It's not that holy to say that you can take it, and take it, and take it. There's nothing holy in that. It can even be very self-absorbed, and masochistic. That I would say, to really study things, and think things through is important for me. I think

> that that has been my saving grace all along is that I have been able to learn, to open to other ways of looking at the world.

Monique, speaking about why she remained in her religious tradition for as long as she did, and about what contributed to her "fall" into self-alienation, said that she had focused on caring for others while neglecting her own needs:

> And in a way it was exactly what was my fall . . . Love, this love thing. Caring for others. Well, I guess I'm still coming back to that a bit. But there has to be a balance between loving, well, caring for others, and caring for yourself. I wasn't caring for myself and I am doing that more now. And I don't get so caught up in other people's lives. And I'm more peaceful, not as hyper, not as tired. For a long time, I just didn't want to get up in the morning . . . For a long time I carried a big burden . . . I think religion gave me that burden. And now I don't see myself as burdened . . . I looked at that conditioning, and I rejected it. I wasn't going to be conditioned like that anymore . . . There wasn't just one point, but actually the process has been going on for the past five years. I've been dropping it through counseling, and by not joining any groups, by not getting involved in too many activities. And when I did get involved with different people, I learned to let go faster.

For her, spirituality has come to be a process that includes self-care. This involves letting go of attachments and excessive responsibilities, and determining for herself the level of involvement in and commitment to activities that is comfortable for her. It is a process of quieting, calming and simplifying her life. In letting go of the emotional investment she once had in her tradition, she is able to take things more lightly, and she feels that she has become more perceptive and considerate of others as a result:

> Before, religion was very important to me, and maybe I used to push that in my teaching. I used to take it very seriously. But now

I don't. So I think in some ways I am more respectful, and I am more aware.

Above all, for Monique, spirituality has come to mean living authentically. Where previously she assigned meaning to her religious tradition and let her life be determined by that structure, she has come to value direct encounter with life independent of any system. Spirituality is an experience of life as process, and meaning is found, not in any particular tradition, but in the unfolding development that results from authentic engagement in the process of life itself. I had asked her, "What is your truth from your journey? What would you want to share?"

Well, there's a strange one coming up. Do you know the song Amazing Grace?

*I: Yes, I do.*

I was blind and now I see. Every time I hear that song, it makes much more sense than it ever did. It has a completely different feeling, and meaning to the song . . . Was that helpful? Does that help?

*I: It says that you have survived, that you give thanks for being able to . . . whatever you have gone through, you are saying thank you for the vision to see more clearly. It's kind of a paradox, but it's an affirmation of faith in a certain sense.*

Of *life*. Of life.

*I: Thank you. That's a better way to say it. It's an affirmation of life.*

The image that Kayde used to describe her experience of spirituality was the spiral. Spirituality was for her very much a process of learning, developing, transforming, a journey whose goal was in the quality with which she lived the

process "day by day". She felt that her personal example of living what she believed, was the most effective way to contribute to the development of other people.

> You know, since the '70's I've been watching everybody grow and change. And I re-read what they've re-written. And even Betty Friedan, and all her changes. Her spiral, her evolutions and revolutions. So I feel very . . . we never arrive, of course, but I feel very comfortable about what's happening. And that probably gives me the impetus to hang in there and see the whole broad picture from a changing point of view. It's not going to happen overnight. I do have some say and I can affect other lives by *living* what I want other people to experience, through me. And that's what spirituality is, living it day by day. And that's what's wrong with the Church. There is no life, no meaning . . .

Kayde realized that many women were so dissatisfied with their religious traditions that they had left them. While she understood and respected their choice, she was personally very committed to working within her tradition in order to transform it. She felt that by expressing herself as a strong, independent and creative woman within her tradition, she was creating a context in which clergy could let go of negative stereotypes and learn to appreciate these qualities in women:

> That's one perspective. To say, we will not leave our traditions; that there is more energy to make change within; to empower ourselves . . . to stay, and through . . . it sounds trivial, but these are my words . . . Through *relating* with, or using ourselves, with clergy, using our relationship to show, to prove, to let you experience that this is real and good, and not to be afraid of whatever it is that we represent that is a fear in you. That's like having all those little shadows that women are cast within. We have to challenge those. We have to hang in there as people are learning about themselves. I'm still hanging in. I can see some changes in the hierarchy in our diocese.

Miriam came to equate spirituality with integration. She spoke of this as an ongoing, conscious process of embracing life in its wholeness. She thought that this was required by the nature of life itself, but blocked by traditional religious conditioning through its emphasis on moral dualisms, and its doctrine of the absolute separation of God from creation. Miriam felt that self-affirmation was essential in order to move beyond this conditioning. For her, grace existed in the fact that we had innate resources that we could access to liberate ourselves from the limitations of an inauthentic life. However, it was up to us to free ourselves through utilizing these resources. Both effort, and letting go in inner attunement were needed. Miriam's perception of wholeness as fundamental to life, and spirituality as the ongoing process of integrating apparent dualisms into that unity where "the sense of Self, and the sense of God's presence, are one and the same" was the key to her healing. She was able to come to terms with the suffering she had undergone in the past, let go of social and religious conditioning that she felt was neither life-giving nor true to her experience, and open herself to a more authentic, fulfilling existence.

All of the women in this study have come to view the spiritual journey as a continuing process of transformation. Because the following comments by Miriam illuminate this process so beautifully, they are included here as a summary:

> The whole journey, I think in the development of our spiritual nature is integration.
>
> *I: Did you feel that you had to leave your tradition, psychologically, mentally, in order to move on?*

> What I had to do was to integrate that, somehow, to see the value of that as it is now a part of my life. It was as if I was able to say, now and I am, that the pain that I experienced, that led me to the awareness of who I am, I still see the benefit of that. That's what we do sometimes, humanly, it's the need to call it either good or bad, that duality, and the more I retain the need to retain this, get rid of that, by disowning, we only reinforce that. Life has its ups and downs, I need to bring everything into oneness, because that's how life operates. The process is to integrate it. But what I choose to believe, is that a lot of people don't want to work so hard on themselves. When they learn that it's an ongoing process, and that you've got to do it for you, they drop it. Oh, they're not telling me what to do, I've got to do it for me, forget it. You have to care a lot about yourself, maybe that is the ingredient, to go up against the contradiction, and the argument, of that old tradition. So that the sense of Self, and the sense of God's presence, are one and the same. To come up against the weight of that tradition, and say thank you very much for sharing but I don't agree with that, means that I have to think a lot of the value of what I believe, of what I experience. It's a stubbornness within me, a journey, a process that says, I know that that's not the truth. I stop relying on somebody telling me what to do. That anger can be positive. It can move us out of conditioning. We are talking spirituality, and yet I think it's so important to realize, as a man thinketh in his heart, so is he; the power of our thoughts is such that literally, transformation and healing are possible the minute I decide that it's possible, so I can say thank you to my yesterdays, for teaching me what you did, and for bringing me where I am, now I choose to be free of that conditioning. Maybe it's time to chuck all religion, just live your life as your religion, because to me that's what religion is, the way you live your life.

The women discovered that transforming themselves and transforming their traditions were related processes. Resolution of their conflict with traditional religion came with their understanding that spirituality "begins and ends" with self-transformation. Knowing this, they felt free to work for change within their

traditions, or to leave them when they concluded that their religions were closed to change, or opposed to their transformation.

# 5. DISCUSSION

## A. Introduction

The focus of this project was psychological rather than theological. As a psychological focus, women's experiences were explored in terms of spiritual development, and development of self with regard to individuality and autonomy. To attempt to link what has been written here with theology or feminist theology is beyond the scope of this work. There may be both theoretical and practical applications to those areas, particularly with reference to Woman - Church. However, these are subjects for future research.

The women who participated in this project shared so much, brought such richness and depth of experience into conversation, that I initially found it overwhelming. It took a great deal of time and reflection for me to integrate it to the extent that I could present it in the form of the themes in the previous chapter. Much of what could be considered a discussion of the material has been intertwined within the explication of the themes. That has made writing this chapter difficult for me. I am still very much in process in terms of integrating what I have learned from these conversations. There are so many questions and ideas welling up inside me. Although I have a vision of what I want to say, there is not the necessary time for me to develop and articulate that vision here. Learning to speak with greater clarity and comprehensiveness about the many issues raised in the themes is my "growing edge". In the present discussion I will focus on the issue of spirituality re-visioned as the process of developing an authentic sense of self. It will involve examining choices women

face in this process. I will begin by introducing the idea that directing their own development is necessary for women's psychological wholeness.

Before beginning, I would like to state that it is not my intention to speak for men, or about men's development. I am a woman, and it is women who have been the participants in this project. Nor do I intend to exclude men as readers who may gain something from this study. I would also like to state that I do not imagine that the women in this study speak for all women who have experienced conflict with their religious tradition. This is a small sample of white, Western women in mid-life, with socio-economic backgrounds in the working and middle classes. However, before I began this study I would never have expected such strength of common feeling and experience among the women. When they went over the themes, and read the other women's stories, they spoke of how deeply validated they felt their own experience to be, and of how very important it was for them to realize that they were not alone; that a community of women existed who could understand and confirm their experience. (See Appendix A). On this basis, I do imagine that there are many other women who will also find their experience illuminated and affirmed.

### B. The Necessity for Self-definition

The quote that follows is from a conversation between Michael Toms and Joseph Campbell, pre-eminent scholar, writer, and teacher of mythology:

> *M:* . . . we've gone from a traditional patriarchal idea of woman to the feminist movement and the assertion of women's power -- a return of the goddess, if you will. What's happening in these changes of the past couple of decades?

> J: We're in a marvelous moment with respect to the state of women, and it's a movement just as crucial for men because the archetypology of just the wife and mother is gone. Many a man, when he thinks of marriage, imagines that archetype, and he is unwilling or unable to face the fact of a female personality. Men have had a wider range of life courses enabling them to develop their potentials, but women have been condemned to one style, one system of interests and concerns. That's not true anymore; the world has opened up to them. Now there are very few models for them. The immediate model is the men's world. . . . But the great thing is the emerging possibility of the female personality as the guiding image of the woman's own life. . . . (Maher & Briggs, 1990, pp. 126-127).

These comments by Toms and Campbell are in some ways undoubtedly naïve and misleading. The impressions that the women's movement is only several decades old, that women in general have a "wider range of life courses" available to them, and that it is the world which has "opened up to them" are erroneous. The movement for equal rights for women goes back at least as far as the publication of Mary Wollstonecraft's A Vindication of the Rights of Woman in 1792. In many parts of the world, women remain "condemned to one style, one system of interests and concerns". Where changes have occurred, such that women have increased their options and improved their position in society, it is due more to their active struggle against injustice and oppression than to society serendipitously "opening up" to them.

These objections aside, I share Campbell's enthusiasm for the promise that the present time holds for both men and women. Until recently women have had little freedom to develop themselves outside of the roles of wife and mother. Men have seen women primarily as caretakers of others, not as persons in their own right. The feminist movement has provided both women and men with the

wonderful challenge and opportunity to raise their consciousness regarding their nature and potentials, and to re-vision and transform relations between the sexes.

Campbell emphasizes that the most important opportunity that the present moment in history brings to women is the "emerging possibility of the female personality as the guiding image of the woman's own life". This is a superb statement, in its recognition of the necessity for women's autonomy. I would phrase it a bit differently, however, as the term "female personality" appears to suggest that something like a generic female personality exists that women now have the chance to model themselves after. What I find significant is not that women can now be guided by some abstract image of "female personality", but that they now have the opportunity to develop the full range of human capabilities, and to free themselves from having to conform to *any* image, whatever its ideological roots. What is inspiring is the possibility that exists for women to become and be seen as *individuals*; for each woman to define herself in the context of a community which acknowledges that it is richer for her having done so.

The growing possibility for women to define themselves is more than just a "great thing" as Campbell puts it. It is a necessity for women's psychological well-being:

> The construction of their own meaningful identity is for human beings not only a possibility, but a vital necessity; the satisfaction of this need is the specifically human motive and that which qualifies all the other wants and needs that may animate conscious behaviour (Dewart, 1989, p. 245).

Without the freedom to shape our own identity and guide our own development through personally meaningful choices, the integration of personality required for psychological wholeness, or self-realization, is not possible:

> The central conception of Personality is that of a whole. . . . As an active, living whole, Personality is fundamentally an organ of self-realization; the end of a whole is more wholeness, in other words, more of its creative self, more self-realization. . . . The essence of Personality is creative freedom in respect of its own conditions of experience and development . . . Freedom means holistic self-determination, and as such it becomes one of the great ideals of Personality, whose self-realization is dependent on its inner holistic freedom (Smuts, 1927, pp. 299 - 300).

Of the four schools of modern psychology, the "third force", Humanistic Psychology, arose out of Abraham Maslow's perception that people have an innate need for self-actualization, the development of a healthy, authentic sense of self[1]. He believed that although this need was innate, environmental influences played a major part in blocking the developmental process (Hergenhahn, 1984, p. 329). In order to foster personal growth, humanistic therapies were created to help people "to understand and neutralize these determinants, to learn how to listen to and be willing to act upon the promptings of the 'inner voice'" (Holroyd, 1989, p. 141).

The realization that humans have an innate need to develop themselves and create an authentic sense of self led Carl Jung to develop the concept of individuation, which can be defined as: "A person's becoming himself, whole,

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[1] See Maslow, A. (1969), Toward a psychology of being. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

indivisible and distinct from other people or collective psychology (though also in relation to these)" (Samuels *et al.*, 1986, p. 76). Jung believed that individuation coincided with the development of an ethical sense, and that the development of the individual was necessary for the welfare of society as a whole:

> Individuation is a natural necessity inasmuch as its prevention by a leveling down to collective standards is injurious to the vital activity of the individual. . . . Any serious check to individuality, therefore, is an artificial stunting. It is obvious that a social group consisting of stunted individuals cannot be a healthy and viable institution . . . (Jung, 1976, CW6, paras. 757 - 758).

Individuation requires that a person move beyond identification with the social mask that they wear in their adaptation to society. According to Samuels *et al.*, this mask includes gender identity (*ibid.*, p. 107). It also involves freeing oneself from dominant cultural images that have shaped one's sense of self.

> The aim of individuation is nothing less than to divest the self of the false wrappings of the persona on the one hand, and the suggestive power of primordial images on the other (Jung, 1966, CW7, para. 269).

For Jung, self-development was very much a 'religious' issue, and the psyche becomes sacrament[2]: "Individuation is the life in God" (Jung, 1976, CW18, para. 1624). Jung's work is now incorporated within Transpersonal Psychology, the fourth major school in the discipline.

According to Capra (1982) the most recent developments in psychology suggest that there is another major school beginning to take shape outside the

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[2] John Dourley discusses this idea in his book The psyche as sacrament (1981). Toronto: Inner City Books.

borders of academic psychology, one which is congruent with systems theory and harmonious with the world view of spiritual traditions. Though still uncoordinated, it is based on a unifying paradigm emphasizing principles of wholeness and evolution as self-organizing processes within systems, including the individual. Jantsch (1976, 1980) and Bohm (1980) are two authors whose work points to the direction this movement is taking. In this new movement, self-actualization is recognized as an essential psychic process, and environmental influences are acknowledged as having a significant effect on development:

> The human psyche is seen as a dynamic system involving a variety of functions that systems theorists associate with the phenomenon of self-organization. . . . Inner growth and self-actualization are seen as essential to the dynamics of the human psyche, in full agreement with the emphasis on self-transcendence in the systems view of life.
>
> Another important aspect of the new psychology is the growing recognition that the psychological situation of an individual cannot be separated from the emotional, social, and cultural environment . . . (*ibid.*, pp. 368 - 369).

Modern scholarship in psychology (and in Dewart's work, philosophy) makes two things clear. First, for their psychological and spiritual well-being, women need to create their own authentic sense of self. Second, this requires that women confront and integrate cultural conditioning. Dewart emphasizes the importance of the latter point:

> Human beings need above all to make sense of themselves, to integrate their experiences of themselves, and thereby to acquire the identity of a self. . . . [I]n order to be truly satisfied with anything else that otherwise might be of value, even organic life

> itself, they must experience themselves as having significance. And since they can integrate their experiences of themselves only by situating themselves in the world as experiencers of it, their first need is to integrate their experiences of the world (Dewart, 1989, p. 246).

We have seen that embodied within religion are a culture's values and guiding archetypes, and therefore what women experience when they attempt to integrate religious conditioning will have relevance for women's development within the wider cultural context. What can we learn, then, from the women in this study about women's development of an authentic sense of self? Let us begin by looking at how these women have re-visioned spirituality.

### C. Spirituality as Development of an Authentic Self

Spirit is defined as "a the vital animating essence of a person or animal (*was sadly broken in spirit*). b the intelligent non-physical part of a person; the soul" (The Concise Oxford Dictionary, 1990); and "1. The breath of life . . . It has often been viewed as a gift of God (or the gods) and/or even as part of the very breath of God. 2. The Soul. That immaterial agent in humans which causes consciousness (including willing) and the life functions . . . " (Angeles, 1981, Dictionary of Philosophy). Spirit is considered to be synonymous with "self, ego, inner self" (Rodale, 1978, The Synonym Finder). Of relevance for the present discussion is a description of spirit as "the essence of personal identity," (Hare, 1987, p. 2) and of spirituality as:

> [H]ungering and thirsting for God, even if we do not use God-language to describe what we seek. It is about longing for meaning, wholeness, and integrity . . . It is about the craving for holiness, justice and purity that refuses to be restrained by pain or

> deflected by fear . . . It is about the urgent need to give and receive, to know and be known, to love and be loved beyond the limits of space or time yet through the total personhood of body/mind/soul that we are. By spirituality I refer to that which gives meaning to life and makes us conscious of our relationship to God and the world (*ibid.*, pp. 8-9).

As Hare says, "Religions have all claimed to provide nurture for spirituality" (*ibid.*, p. 6).

Throughout our conversations, the women in this study described spirituality in many different, yet congruent ways. Underlying all these descriptions there is a common motif. When these women spoke about spirituality, in whatever context, they were speaking about being authentic. For these women, spirituality and the development of an authentic sense of self were inseparable.

*1. Being*

In the intrapersonal realm, authenticity involved self-affirmation. The women talked about being in touch with themselves, and accepting themselves rather than investing their sense of identity in something outside themselves, whether a God-image, a human person, or an institution. As well, they were no longer trying to conform to an image or definition of themselves imposed from without. Being authentic meant loving themselves; acknowledging their intrinsic value, and their innate potentials. It also meant being open and receptive to all parts of themselves; recognizing their wholeness. Spirituality was inseparable from self-development in that these women spoke of it as becoming an integrated self. In re-claiming Self, these women were claiming Wholeness as authentic being.

*2. Relating*

Authenticity in the interpersonal realm required self-assertion. The women spoke about sharing their perceptions and concerns when they felt that it was appropriate to do so. Being authentic meant finding the courage to speak when they were being oppressed or abused. It meant taking responsibility in relationships by calling for dialogue rather than letting themselves be silenced, and in this way, it meant establishing genuine relationships. Spirituality was inseparable from self-development in that the women were learning to speak from the truth that was within them; that arose out of their own conscience and their own experience. In re-claiming Voice they were claiming Equality as authentic being.

*3. Creating*

In the transpersonal realm, authenticity involved self-determination in relationship to the larger cultural context. The women spoke of taking charge of their own lives. They took responsibility for their own minds through questioning, studying, and learning to think independently, rather than relying on someone else to tell them what to think or believe. They talked of letting go of emotional dependencies, and learning to nurture themselves and attend to their own self-care. Being authentic meant expressing their creativity in ways that reflected their individual concerns and interests, rather than conforming to traditional gender roles of dependence and passivity. Self-development and spirituality were inseparable, in that the women were taking responsibility for creating meaningful lives for themselves, in ways that were also of service to

their communities. In re-claiming Mind they were claiming Autonomous Responsibility as authentic being.

*4. Transforming*

Authenticity in the realm of renewal, the domain of process itself, involved conscious recognition of process. These women spoke of their awareness that God or truth could never be contained within the limits of any form. They spoke of their awareness that spirituality involved a process of change and development that included making mistakes, and being authentic meant accepting their human imperfection, while continuing to learn and broaden their perspectives. Being authentic also meant taking personal responsibility for their development, rather than relying on a system or an institution for their spiritual well-being. It involved developing in wisdom and compassion through transforming their own hearts and minds. Self-development and spirituality were inseparable in that these women were committed to an ongoing path of transformation in their own lives, day by day. In re-claiming responsibility for the process of integration, they were claiming engagement in Process as authentic being.

For the women in this study, spirituality was inseparable from the development of an authentic self, and an authentic sense of self was characterized by Wholeness, Equality, Autonomous Responsibility, and Process. For these women, self-development involved awakening from self-alienation, subordination, determination by others, and formalism. It was a movement from the distorted, alienating pseudo-identity of incomplete and inferior 'Other',

and from a sense of the Divine which had been reduced to a masculine image, into openness and inclusiveness. Development of an authentic sense of self meant coming into a new relationship with self, others, and world. In affirming and accepting themselves, the women experienced God within; in asserting themselves, not in the ontic sense of denying the other's perspective, but as partners in dialogue, the women were creating a context for the God between; in creatively participating in their communities, they were engaged with the God without; and in their dedication to personal transformation they were communing with the God who is forever unknowable and unnameable because it is inexhaustible potential.

Spirituality is about developing a certain type of consciousness; awakened, ethical, in harmony with life. It involves living with awareness and compassion while freeing ourselves from limitations:

> When we have . . . freed ourselves from nostalgia for a cosmic Father Christmas, then our faith can at last become fully human, existential, voluntary, pure, and free from superstition (Cuppitt, 1984, p. 271).

For women, self-development involves a transformation of their perspectives in the intrapersonal, interpersonal, and transpersonal realms, as well as a new vision of transformation itself. From the women in this study, we can learn that women's development of their own identity requires that they claim Wholeness in Being, Equality in Relating, Autonomous Responsibility in Creating, and Process in Transforming. When women claim "Within myself I am whole", it is self-redemptive. When they claim "Within my relationships I am equal", it is redemptive of relationships. When they say "In my community I am

autonomous and responsible", they are helping to redeem an unjust social order; and when women say "Life is change and I am in process", it is redemptive because it reminds us that we are not God, that we need to continually "let go of God for the sake of God" (Fox, 1983, p. 50), and that as we develop we need to keep coming back into balance through inner attunement. This is the *new naming*[3] that the women in this study were engaged in, as they described their self-affirmation, self-assertion, self-determination, and commitment to transformation. This is their "conscious self-selection of consciousness" (Dewart, 1989, p. 361). As an ethical, relational, self-responsible spirituality, it also points to a system of assertions required by women who seek to create their own identity within a patriarchal culture.

> To exist humanly is to name the self, the world, and God. The 'method' of the evolving spiritual consciousness of women is nothing less than this beginning to speak humanly -- a reclaiming of the right to name. The liberation of language is rooted in the liberation of ourselves (Daly, 1985, p. 8).

It is of particular significance that what these women have come to name, through their own experience, as spirituality can also be seen to describe what is necessary for their self-definition. This has two consequences. First, women's new naming of their spirituality is being born out of the depths of their struggle with self-alienation, and is therefore grounded in the depths of their being. In claiming their own identity as including equality and autonomy, they are providing the secure foundation women need, to be empowered in their quest for

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[3] In Diving Deep and Surfacing: Women Writers on Spiritual Quest (1980). Boston: Beacon Press, Carol Christ refers to *new naming* as women "giving form to their experience through words" (pp. 23 - 24).

social justice:

> Women's spiritual quest undergirds every moment of women's social quest. A woman's recognition of the grounding of her social quest and that of other women in the powers of being which she has experienced gives her day to day confidence. Knowing that she has a right to her own mode of being can give her strength to stand up for her principles (Christ, 1980, p. 11).

Second, opposition to women creating their own identity gains its fundamental justification from traditional religious assumptions about who women are and how they should behave. These ideas perpetuate women's oppression. By renaming spirituality as the development of an authentic self, women are calling into question these assumptions, and thereby challenging their oppression at its roots. That challenge at such a fundamental level is necessary for change in the social order is made clear by Bohm and Peat (1987):

> The principal difficulty with the religious approach . . . is that it tends to produce rigidly fixed ideas. These are very heavily emotionally charged so that they prevent the free play of the mind, and thus bring about destructive false play and the blocking of creativity (p. 235). [T]hese rigidities and assumptions . . . may be compared to a kind of pollution that is constantly being poured into the stream of the generative order of society. It makes no sense to attempt to "clean up" parts of this pollution farther downstream while continuing to pollute the source itself (pp. 235 - 236). It should be clear that by 'misinformation' is meant a form of *generative information*, rather than simply incorrect statements of facts (p. 237).

In naming themselves Whole, Equal, Autonomously Responsible, and in Process, women are naming their own Wholeness and Self-organization as the basis for directing their own lives.[4] That these women are directing their own

[4] These claims are consistent with the view of psychological development that Capra claims is emerging as a new movement in psychology (1982, pp. 368 - 369). He describes the "two principle dynamic phenomena of self-organization" as: "'self-renewal', which is the ability to renew themselves while maintaining their integrity, and 'self-transcendence' -- the ability to reach out creatively beyond physical and mental boundaries in the processes of learning, development, and evolution" (*ibid.*, p. 269).

development does not mean that they are free to do whatever they like; that now all options open up for them. What it does mean is that they have greatly increased their options; that in entering the hermeneutic circle[5] of choice --› responsibility --› transformation --› freedom --› choice, etc., they have greater degrees of freedom. They are more able to interact purposively with themselves and the world in ways that enrich both self and world:

> The emergence of conscious self-direction, or *freedom*, as a new dimension of life did not mean that the determining causality of every other factor impinging upon the organism from without and within had vanished. . . . [but that] it now was a function of the organism's awareness of its purposiveness and of the objects of which it might avail itself to fulfill it (Dewart, 1989, p. 257).

Before consciously claiming this power of choice, their own existential freedom, women will have for many years been making choices in their lives that led to this development. What can we learn from the women in this study about the choices that other women may be faced with as the possibility opens up for them to define their identity? As we have seen, developing their capacity for self-definition will require that women not only have an awareness of environmental influences, but that they consciously integrate them, retaining what furthers their development and letting go of what hinders it. This takes us to a consideration of development as choice. I will begin with a general discussion of the idea, and then briefly consider an issue of choice within each theme.

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[5] The hermeneutic circle is very different from the "vicious circle" of fate; it is more like a spiral, where we return to the "beginning" but with deeper understanding, greater meaning.

**D. Development as Choice**

When we address the issue of women's development within the present cultural context, it becomes clear that if psychological well-being requires both a sense of wholeness and self-determination, then there is a fundamental contradiction between what our culture says is required for psychological health, and the restrictions that it places on women through their assigned gender role and identity[6]. Our culture does not support women in their quest for individuation. Until both men and women take equal responsibility for child care and domestic labour, and until there is social justice for women, including economic parity, the cultural environment will continue to place severe limitations on many women's possibilities for self-definition, and therefore on their psychological wholeness. According to Anthony Astrachan, we can expect cultural change supporting women's self-development to be a slow process. In his book How Men Feel (1986), the result of his extensive research on men's responses to the women's movement, he reports:

> The proportion of all men who genuinely support women's demands for independence and equality is very small. I would guess from my interviews and other research that it's between 5 and 10 percent . . . At the moment, ambivalents and opponents are still in the majority (p. 402).

Astrachan finds hope in the fact that although few men are making the necessary personal adjustments in terms of child care and domestic labour to

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[6] Broverman *et al.* (1972), in their research on gender stereotyping, found that in our society people expect men to be more independent and competent than women. The "ideal" woman is imagined to be more dependent, more submissive and less competent than a 'healthy adult, sex unspecified'. See also Eagly (1983). Research has revealed that mental health professionals share these biases about gender differences. See Broverman *et al.* (1970).

qualify as genuine supporters of women's independence, increasing numbers of men are willing to pay lip service to the idea. Kaufman (1990) reports that when men do become supporters it is as a result of their spouse or partner making it a condition of being in the relationship.

Women who seek an authentic sense of self realize that the issue goes much deeper than simply a lack of support for their development, however. Not only does our society not support women's quest for liberation, it actively opposes it. Astrachan concurs:

> The individual angers and anxieties, the collective power plays, the deployment of economic forces all show that change will be immensely difficult, toweringly high in social and economic cost (*ibid.*, p. 403).

Our society prides itself on championing democracy and freedom. Astrachan reminds us that these are basic principles underlying women's quest for liberation. As he puts it, "what the women's movement is all about and what men can learn from it and what some men have already learned from it [is]: the right of every human being to independence and to choice, the right to decide for one's self when to say no and when to say yes" (*ibid.*, p. 286).

A woman who seeks spiritual and psychological well-being, which we have seen are inseparable, must contend with outer condemnation for her actions, as well as deal with the internalized images and voices which warn her that the root of all Eve-il is women's freedom of choice, particularly her choice for her own development. Women are faced with the challenge of becoming psychologically whole within a culture whose basic assumptions about women are that they must not have an autonomous self; that if they do, they will lose their self (soul).

Germaine Greer, in The Female Eunuch, states that the distress a woman experiences in our culture is due not to her immaturity but to her enforced dependency, which she refers to as "the infantilization which has gone on ever since she was born":

> Her sufferings do not stem from her failure to grow up into mature womanhood, but from her striving against what prevents her from living and working with her own powers (1970, p. 98).

Encountering opposition to their independence, women need to remember that choice is also *their* right, and that it is necessary for the creation of a meaningful life. In The Inner World of Choice, Frances Wickes, distinguished psychotherapist and author, speaks about the need for choice:

> The art of living is, in its essential meaning, a development and transformation of the power of inward choice.
> Refusal of inward choice and its creative power makes of life a repetitious round, a treadmill of duty or a merry-go-round of meaningless activity. Man is bound to the wheel of fate until consciousness of his God-given power of choice dawns upon him. Then he glimpses the paradoxical nature of the force that has both bound him and given him power to break the bonds *if* he will choose the pain entailed in the struggle and accept the perils of freedom to be encountered on the spiral way that sweeps upward from the broken wheel.
> It is this potential of choice which is the supreme gift of the God of Being and Becoming. At every shift in the eternal drama of transformation, there is offered the divine gift of choice (1963, pp. 1, 2 - 3, 9).

From the women in this study, I learned that women's spirituality begins with the choice to live authentically. When these women took the courage (from the Latin *cor*, 'heart': The Concise Oxford Dictionary (1990)) to confront the religious conditioning which had created a taboo against their autonomy, and

chose to act in ways that were authentic, they were liberated into the realization that spirituality is inseparable from their self-development. They reclaimed the power of choice, and on this basis their self-directed development proceeds:

> It takes a great deal of courage . . . to decide to design your own image instead of the one that society rewards, but it gets easier as you go along (Greer, 1970, p. 146).

According to Dewart, directing our own development has its rewards. It is the source of truly human joy:

> Creating and appropriating one's identity is an arduous task. But it offers appropriate rewards. By integrating themselves living organisms merely stay alive, whereas by integrating itself consciousness enjoys being alive (1989, p. 247).

**Choice Within the Four Themes.** We have seen that for the women in this study, self-development involved choice in four life contexts. In considering what obstructed their choice and what promoted it in each area, we can gain greater insight into the challenges that other women potentially face as they seek self-development. In each section that follows, I will focus the discussion around a relevant quote from All Mighty: A Study of the God-Complex in Western Man, by Dr. Horst-Eberhard Richter[7], Director of Psychosomatic Medicine and Psychotherapy at the University of Giessen. In this book, for which he won in 1980 the Theodor Huess Prize for Outstanding Contributions to Society from the German Government, Richter concerns himself with the issues of how Western

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[7] Originally published in German in 1979 under the title *Der Gottes Komplex*, Rowohlt Verlag GmbH, Reinbek bei Hamburg. Authorized English translation by Jan van Heurck (1984), Hunter House, Inc., Publishers.

civilization came to be dominated by the power principle, what collective factors prevent a "radical rethinking" that could lead to constructive change, and what would be needed for transformation of the social order. His thesis is that, in order to avoid emotional suffering and to escape from feelings of vulnerability which are part of the human condition, men split off these feelings, assigned them to women, and unconsciously identified themselves with God. He examines prior attempts to renew society and asserts that they were unsuccessful because "men failed to take into account the down-to-earth realities of relations between the sexes" (1984, p. 78). He argues that the renewal of society and the expansion of human consciousness will not be possible until we overcome the "artificial, culturally-induced psychological dichotomy of the sexes" (*ibid.*, p. 89).

*1. Being*

> All of us are heirs to that historic flight into an inflated sense of our own godlike stature . . . The men . . . assume the role of divinity and realize the vision of omnipotence directly, whereas the women . . . help them to realize and fulfill this vision, and thus indirectly participate in it (*ibid.*, p. 121).

In the context of Being, self-development centres around the issue of personal identity. As we have seen, one of the primary functions which religion is intended to serve in a culture is to provide guidance in the process of individual development. The women in this study had expected their traditions to help them attain a confident sense of their own presence and value; in Pat's words, to become "real, whole" persons. Instead, religious conditioning was destructive to their sense of self and self-esteem.

There were a number of factors in traditional religion which contributed to the self-alienation these women experienced. Primary among these were the image of God as male, and the doctrine of Original Sin. The women in this study learned that God was "out there" in the form of husband or clergy, or in the dogma, rules and imagery of their traditions, and they learned that God was male. When we combine the assumption that God is the source of our existence and the ground of our Being with the idea that God is male, the implications are that only men have direct access to Being, only men are made in the image of God, and males and whatever is considered to be 'masculine' are more divine, of greater value than women and whatever is considered to be 'feminine'. It also suggests that in order for women to partake in existence and value, Being and worth, they need to be subsumed in, or be acknowledged and validated by males, and religious traditions which, through male clergy, mediate the word of the male God. As Richter suggests, women learn that they participate in Being "indirectly", through men. This made it difficult for the women in this study to feel a confident sense of their own existence.

Schaef makes a similar point: "Women have no chance of ever becoming God and try to relate to these mortal gods -- men -- in an acceptable way" (1985, p. 164). Feeling that they had to relate in an acceptable way to the male God and his representatives was a second factor that contributed to the women's self-estrangement. They felt they needed validation from their traditions, and so tried to live up to what was expected of them. They discovered, however, that no matter what they did they did not receive the affirmation they sought. Trying to relate in an acceptable way, they found themselves caught in a double bind.

While women are devalued because of their association with the body, sexuality and feelings, their only legitimate role if they are not nuns is in being mothers, and 'helpmeets' to men. It is through their bodies and feelings that women are to meet men's needs and please them. Therefore, religious conditioning sets up a situation where women are compelled to seek affirmation through the very characteristics by which they are condemned. Pat spoke of how this double bind left her feeling "torn apart". Monique and Jen, while not caught in this double bind in the same way, experienced that they had to repress and deny their sexuality and feelings. They also felt they were never going to be good enough, and so they too were caught in a vicious circle of seeking affirmation from a system in which women are considered innately inferior.

Jen spoke of how the Church's doctrine of original sin contributed to her feelings of self-alienation. As we have seen, this doctrine scapegoats women for sin. Although both men and women are said to be born in Original Sin, women are held responsible for it. Branden, in Honouring the Self: The Psychology of Confidence and Respect, comments on the effects of this teaching:

> The concept of Original Sin -- of guilt where there is no possibility of innocence, no freedom of choice, no alternatives available -- is anti-self-esteem by its very nature. It is, therefore, anti-human (1984, p. 62).

Tied to the myth of the Fall, this doctrine feeds the assumption that women are morally inferior to men, a premise that has permeated our culture in various ways. Until Carol Gilligan's research on women's moral development fundamentally revised theory in that domain[8], Laurence Kohlberg, arguably the

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[8] See Gilligan, C. (1982), In a Different Voice: Psychological Theory and Women's Development. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

most influential contemporary theorist in the area of moral development, thought that men were more likely to develop higher levels of moral reasoning than women. He believed that women tended to remain at stage three of his six stage developmental model, whereas men tended to move on to stage four and beyond (Kohlberg and Kramer, 1969).

In summary, religious conditioning led to self-alienation in the following ways: through its image of a male God, and doctrine which suggests that connection to the Divine must be mediated by males including male clergy, the women became separated from a sense of their own Be-ing; through its scapegoating of women for sin and evil, the women came to distrust themselves, and their sense of agency was damaged; through its linking of sin and evil with sexuality and physicality, and its devaluation of those human characteristics which it associates with women, the women lacked a positive sense of self, and were caught up in a struggle to repress their senses and their feelings. The women lacked a sense of identity, self-worth, and self-integration. Although the women in this study experienced this lack in an intense way, it is a problem shared by many women in our culture. According to Greenspan in A New Approach to Women and Therapy, lack of a sense of self, and doubt about their competence are two of the problems that most frequently bring women to therapy (1983, p. 3). In my work with women, it is my experience that anxiety and depression, complaints that women commonly bring to therapy, are intimately tied in with their lack of a sense of identity, self-worth, or self-efficacy. For the women in this study, spirituality involved healing this damaged sense of self through self-affirmation. According to Spretnak, without this

healing, any other progress women make in terms of social justice will be meaningless:

> Virginia Woolf once said that women [under patriarchy] have difficulty telling the truth about our "experience as body", and she believed we are psychologically uncomfortable with ourselves because we are held in low esteem by society. These are spiritual problems, blockages that prevent the female body/mind from operating autonomously and evolving into wisdom. If we change social, political, and economic conditions but do not work at changing our self-images, our struggle will have been an empty gesture (Spretnak, 1982c, pp. 247 - 248).

**Choosing self-affirmation.** When women become aware of their self-alienation, the choice that leads to their development is self-affirmation. This is a developmental challenge for many women for several reasons. First, it involves overcoming internalized messages that if they claim their own power of self, and acknowledge and validate themselves in a positive way, they are guilty of the sin of pride. Second, it requires that women come to terms with the false sense of self they have internalized, and begin to take responsibility for creating a healthy identity for themselves. I will discuss these issues under the headings *The need for self-esteem* and *The responsibility for self-affirmation.*

**The need for self-esteem.** Jean Baker Miller states that women have been taught to fear their power of self:

> Almost from the moment of birth, there has been instilled in us the inner notion that acting out of one's self is a dangerous, frightening and evil thing. Although such actions are encouraged in men, and become very enhancing to men's sense of self, self-worth, and self-esteem -- they have the reverse effect for many women . . . producing a sense of unworthiness, evil, danger -- or, at the very least, a sense of conflict and unease . . .

> It then prevents us from being able to formulate, to know, and state our desires (Miller, 1985, p. 3).[9]

Women have been taught that they should not have an ego, and that they have a tendency to be proud. I have worked with women who thought that if they liked themselves it was egoism, and that if they refused to accept their culturally-defined inferiority and sought equality in their relationships, they were being proud. A distinction that is helpful for women in the domain of Self, of Being, is that having an ego is not the same as egoism. Branden's definition of ego and Wickes' description of "ego inflation" are useful in making this distinction:

> By *ego* . . . I mean the unifying centre of awareness, the centre of consciousness, the ultimate sense of 'I'; that which perceives reality, preserves the inner continuity of one's own existence, and generates a sense of personal identity (Branden, 1985, p. 74).

> Identification with an ideal image is ego inflation, whether it occurs in the life of an adult or a small child. Children have a quality of reverence as well as a predisposition for magic that enables them to step in and out of the role of hero or god; but when the heroic or admired is stamped upon a child's small life as an image of what he is intended to be, or worse, already is, he identifies with the image and may see himself as the hero while acting the prig (1963, pp. 30 - 31).

What can help to liberate women into self-affirmation is the awareness that we require a grounded sense of self, and self-esteem for psychological health and spiritual development. Chaudhuri, in The Essence of Spiritual Philosophy, comments on the need for an ego:

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[9] Miller also discusses this idea in her book Toward a New Psychology of Women (1976, pp. 115 - 124; Boston: Beacon Press).

> The ego [is] the spark of self-consciousness in humans . . . We should not destroy it; we need to cultivate it and transform it. This is a great principle of self-development. Destruction of the ego means destruction of the self. When the egos of individuals are destroyed they enter mental hospitals. They become incapacitated for living in society, unable to live their own lives anymore. How can they live their own lives when their sense of self is destroyed? We can see the absurdity of this. Ego is the seed of the true self in humans. In the interior of the ego, inside the husk, the kernel of a human's spiritual potential lies hidden (1990, pp. 114 - 115).

Branden points out the need for self-esteem:

> A human being *needs* self-respect, *needs* the experience of worthiness, fully as much as he or she needs self-confidence . . . Lacking the sense of that worthiness, we will fail in those acts of self-assertion that our well-being requires. In key areas of life we will be interrupted or paralyzed (to varying degrees) -- condemned to feelings of being inappropriate to life (Branden, 1985, p. 21).

**The responsibility for self-affirmation.** While traditional religious teachings caution women against the sin of pride, feminist theologians have interpreted women's sin in a very different way. Over twenty years ago, Valerie Saiving pointed out the inappropriateness of characterizing women's sin as excessive self-assertion. She contended that socialization led them to sin in a different way than men, and described women's sin as "under-development or negation of self"[10]. Nelle Morton, a noted feminist theologian, concurs:

> We can no longer tolerate confessing sins we feel we have not committed . . . We can now begin to confess those sins we feel we have committed. The suppression of our own anger, not

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[10] See "The Human Situation: A Feminine View", in Christ, C.P. & Plashow, J. (eds.), Woman - Spirit Rising: A Feminist Reader in Religion. San Francisco: Harper & Row. (1979, pp. 25 - 42).

> recognizing it as a way of fighting through to a place where love can express itself; the lack of confidence and boldness, the lack of pride, the unquestioned obedience, and the falseness of our humility (1985, p. 82).

Marlene Mae Brouwer, in Spirituality and Religious Imagination: Women's Dilemma in the Church provides a thoughtful and sensitive discussion of the issue of women's sin and their responsibility for self-transformation, or personal "conversion". According to Brouwer, women's conversion requires "casting off sinful self-doubt and self-hatred", and "acknowledging and turning away from the sin of conscious passivity and acquiescence in oppression" (1988, pp. 96 - 97).

As a result of internalizing a negative self-image, women's self-criticism is pervasive. We need to see that this is violence against ourselves. Women will not be able to develop a confident sense of their own identity until they take responsibility for connecting deeply with their own experience and their own truth[11]:

> When I become more honest about my own feelings -- which is another form of honouring the self -- I give up the need to feel 'guilty'. And when I do, I am freer to think more clearly about values and expectations I may need to challenge.
>
> A commitment to awareness -- the will to understand -- is the central pillar of positive self-esteem (Branden, 1985, pp. 64, 45).

God-images become powerful because we invest them with all the unfulfilled longings and desires that have not been met in our relationships, and

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[11] In Prisoners of Childhood: The Drama of the Gifted Child (1981), Alice Miller states that "One is free from depression when self-expression is based on the authenticity of one's own feelings and not on the possession of certain qualities".

this is true for the male God-image in our culture. Women seek to be loved by God, to relate with Him. Men desire to be like God, to emulate Him. For men, giving up the God-image means giving up a fundamental sense of their identity which is deeply unconscious; for women, it means giving up the image which contains all their unmet desires for love, for union, for a sense of male nurturance. However, we need to make our relationship with this image conscious in order to develop our own identity. This is not only the case for women. It is also necessary for men:

> What the masculine myth has done, through the invention of the God-figure, is to make sure that there are only a few men with enough personal definition within themselves to know who they are (Lee, 1989, p. 195).

Our relationship with ourselves is foundational to our relationships with others and with our world. For the women in this study, their decision to affirm themselves was the fundamental choice that made development in all other contexts possible. This self-affirmation was not an intellectual stance they took towards themselves, nor was it the adoption of a superficial attitude of positive thinking about themselves. Rather, it was an orientation of basic friendliness towards themselves that was both born out of and realized in a change in their behaviour towards themselves. They engaged in active self-reflection, they acknowledged and opened to their emotional pain, and they chose to act in ways which honoured rather than negated themselves. They then became aware of their innate spirituality, and experienced the presence of the Divine within themselves and within their lives.

*2. Relating*

> [I]n genuine fellow-feeling the hierarchy of a relationship is abolished. A relationship based on superiority and inferiority is replaced by one of equality and solidarity . . . [T]o carry through the sympathy impulse, we must first make a social decision. The goal of the decision is the recognition of *sameness in difference*. Moreover, this sameness or equality must be experienced directly, not mediated indirectly through a third term or category such as God. If our emotional identification with another person goes only as far as acknowledging his equality or identity with ourselves as a member of the human species, we will remain under the sway of the power principle.
>
> Human solidarity, in the strict sense, is founded on this authentic, natural fellow-feeling in which one person equates himself with another (Richter, 1984, pp. 206 - 207).

The women in this study sought mutuality and a sense of communion in their relationships. They wanted to "give and receive, to know and be known, to love and be loved" (Hare, 1987, p. 8). They expected that their religious traditions would guide them in developing loving relationships, and provide a context in which such relationships could unfold. Instead, they experienced that the norm for relationships that their religions promoted was not one of equality between men and women, but rather a hierarchical arrangement of dominance and submission. This arrangement was built into the very structures of their traditions. Relationships did not form within the context of dialogue and communion, but rather reflected a chain of command from God to male clergy and husbands, to women. According to religious teachings, women belonged in subordinate positions in the family, Church, and community. For the women in this study, conflict with religious conditioning in the context of relating arose

from their experience that fulfilling relationships were not going to be achieved through their subordination.

Women are assigned the responsibility for relationships, while at the same time they are supposed to be silent and submissive. The women who participated in this project found that this put them in a double bind. They sought authentic relating, but discovered that they could maintain their relationships only by not attempting to have a genuine dialogue. Finally, through painful experiences of abandonment, abuse, exploitation or oppression they were unwilling to accept such pseudo-relationships. As Monique put it, she decided "I couldn't play this game anymore. There was no relationship, and to me relationship was very important".

**The responsibility for self-assertion.** When women become aware that subordination blocks authentic relating, the choice that leads to development is their assertion of equality. This can be difficult for women to do, because of their socialization to create a harmonious environment and to maintain a peaceful atmosphere. A Miller puts it, women are "supposed to be the quintessential accommodators, mediators, the adapters, and soothers" (1976, p. 125). Women have learned to create harmony by suppressing their own disagreements, their own conflict. Although they may imagine that this is the loving thing to do, it can also be very self-serving. In The Nature of Loving: Patterns of Human Relationship, Verena Kast, a training analyst and teacher at the C.G. Jung institute of Zurich, makes this clear:

> The loving attitude enables our imagination to grow and unfold without impediment. It is not "saccharine"; it keeps us open to the

> emotional dimension, pledged to the truth of the heart, and ever ready to utter disagreements . . . A loving attitude must not be confused with harmonizing tendencies. The loving attitude intends the Thou, whereas harmonizing tendencies are concerned with the I (1986, p. 85).

According to Miller, women need to reclaim conflict as an inevitable and necessary aspect of development (1976, pp. 125 - 133; 1985).

The women in this study came to understand that their silence did not serve the purposes of love or liberation, but of oppression. Greer puts it this way:

> The love of fellows is based upon understanding and therefore upon communication. It was love that taught us to speak, and death that laid its fingers on our lips (1970, p. 144).

Mindful of their own assertiveness, they began to speak about what they were experiencing, and to share their concerns. They found the courage to speak because they realized that love, and true relating were not possible without it. According to Richter, a "mature relationship" is a "relationship between equal partners", and is characterized by "mutual concern and mutual respect" (1984, pp. 70, 219). The development of mature relationships between men and women is not possible without women asserting their equality. That women find their voice and share it is therefore of utmost importance to us all. Like Richter, the great German poet Rainer Maria Rilke saw the transformation of relationships between men and women as the key to a transformed world:

> [T]he great renewal of the world will perhaps consist in one phenomenon: that man and woman, freed from all mistaken feelings and aversions, will seek each other not as opposites but as brother and sister, as neighbours, and will unite as *human beings* (1986, p. 41).

*3. Creating*

> In the Sermon on the Mount Christ says, "Blessed are the merciful", and promises that they will obtain in return the mercy which they give others. But the Church has perverted something which confers beatitude into a duty, a debt. *The primary phenomenon of sympathy is converted from a natural, innate need into a question of obedience.* Fellow-feeling, fellow-suffering (compassion) and *caritas* are imposed as commandments, as if what took place through them were not a liberating self-expansion achieved in conjunction with other people but rather, primarily, an act of self-conquest which one is compelled to perform. Moreover, the Church has turned itself into the social authority responsible for demanding the fulfillment of this commandment and for seeing that it is carried out. By doing this it has subordinated the sympathy principle to a power principle created and established by itself, thereby lending support to our fatal equation: The sense of solidarity based on fellow-feeling = 'slave morality'. Sympathetic fellow-feeling and *caritas* became equivalent to obedience and impotence (Richter, 1984, pp. 211 - 212).

Self-development in the context of Creating involves moving from dependence, passivity, and conformity to cultural roles and rules which have determined our behaviour and function in society, to self-determination, in which we contribute to our world through freely chosen responsibilities that allow us to express and actualize our unique creative potential. The women in this study had looked to their religious traditions to gain a sense of personal empowerment and self-efficacy. They wanted to experience themselves as capable people who could take charge of their lives and act effectively in the world. Instead, they experienced that their traditions encouraged women to be passive and dependent, and to rely on men, both male clergy and their husbands, to direct their lives.

As a result of religious conditioning into dependence and "self-lessness", the women gave themselves over to others. They did not perceive their own strength and their own competence. They had learned that men were the leaders and that a woman's role was to be the follower and the "help-meet". From their traditions, they got the message that truth and authority were the privilege of men, and devoted love was the duty of women. When women are confined in traditional gender roles, where their self-esteem, economic survival, and positions in society are all dependent on their relationships to men rather than on the development of their own talents and gifts, it breeds attachment, not love. It is the source of a great deal of suffering for women.

In the Catholic tradition, the images of God and of womenhood which the Church still presents as the only acceptable models are as follows: God is male, and transcendent; woman is a servant, who can achieve salvation only as a celibate or a mother. In his 1988 encyclical on the "dignity and vocation of women" (read 'duty'), Pope John Paul II stated that woman "Can only find herself by giving love to others" (p. 109). Based on her own experience, Monique found that such a focus on giving love can prevent authentic being with others:

> I saw how I had loved, and it's not the way I felt that I had wanted. I hadn't really loved . . . I had loved like a mother, but I hadn't really had loving relationships . . . I had always been too concerned with myself giving, with the giving part. It wasn't reciprocal, it wasn't sharing, equality.

As Richter points out, prescribing love as a duty that women must perform in order to be spiritual perverts a natural tendency to sympathy and fellow-

feeling into "obedience and impotence" (*ibid.*). Jen experienced this in an acutely painful way, and remained in an oppressive situation because she had learned that loving meant complete obedience, to the extent of total denial of the self. In her words:

> It's said like that too: "You've made yourself a slave to God". I mean that's the utmost of loving for the spiritual person. You completely become a slave or a servant, not having a mind of your own. That's love. The more I studied, the more I saw, well maybe that's not all there is, there could be another way of doing it. And I was very frustrated doing it that way. I wasn't living to all of my potential.

**The responsibility for self-determination.** When women realize that their lives are being directed by others in ways that do not nourish their spirits, and that prevent them from expressing themselves in authentic and meaningful ways, the choice that furthers development is self-determination. Women can hesitate to make this choice because they have been socialized to believe that self-sacrifice is appropriate for women, and therefore self-determination can seem selfish. There are several distinctions which are helpful at this point.

First, service is meaningful and fruitful when it is freely chosen, and allows new possibilities to develop, "our own special possibilities, the actualization of which is our task in life" (Kast, 1986, p. 22). Otherwise, its source is repression or oppression or simply abandonment of our potential. Love which can be commanded is not love, and the demand that women love reflects a tendency to dominate more than it does a concern with women's well-being:

> Devoted love is something which the superior demands of the inferior, as in the traditional relationship between the sexes. The love which the superior gives the inferior is a form of

> condescension and generosity, an act of grace, a big-hearted display of magnanimity (Richter, 1984, p. 223).

According to Polly Young-Eisendrath, a Jungian psychotherapist who works with couples, traditional gender roles, in which women's primary function is care-giving, prevent both men and women from developing a healthy human identity:

> As long as males dominate in arenas of social power -- from the family to the larger institutions -- and as long as they exclude women and the feminine from these realms, they will bind their identity to the "superior" attributes of the masculine. As long as female power remains limited in our society to care-giving, emotional concerns and the realm of relationship, and remains unrewarded in terms of status, decision-making power and material or symbolic gains (such as money), people will not be free to develop a human identity in a healthy way (Young-Eisendrath, 1984, p. 14).

Second, it is helpful for women to understand that self-care is as much a part of ethical behaviour as is caring for others. In her research on women's moral development, Carol Gilligan found that the development of moral reasoning in women involves moving from a focus on self-care for basic survival, to a concept of responsibility in which the focus is on caring for others, to a perspective in which the self as well as others are included in the concepts of care and responsibility. Transition to the third perspective involves, for women, confronting and rejecting traditional gender roles which equate femininity with selflessness and self-sacrifice (1982).

Third, it is important to recognize that both men and women have equal responsibility for love and care, and this includes the care of children:

> Any person who is a mother or father in the 1990s should know that the moral and physical development of children is the equal concern of men and women. The moral position of anyone born post-Freud and feminism may be freely chosen, but it should no longer be possible to blame a visible mother and not an invisible father for the care or lack of it that children receive. If man chooses to call himself moral, present knowledge denies him the ignorance of claiming that the rearing of children is only a woman's concern . . . Fathers, too, hold keys to their children's well-being (Lee, 1989, p. 211).

Astrachan claims that women's equality, and transformed relations between men and women require that we move beyond traditional gender roles, with men sharing equally in child care:

> [W]e don't want to share power with women. The most important reason that we don't is the fear of mother . . .
>
> [T]he change that will mark the real victory of the revolution [is] the day when men do half the work of child raising from the moment of birth, freeing women from half that burden and changing the pattern of mothering that reproduces the fear of women in every generation (1986, p. 401).

With an awareness that conformity to traditional gender roles is not their "duty", and that such roles limit the development of both men and women, it will become easier for women to choose self-determination.

*4. Transforming*

> As history teaches, every moral order or system which is conceived as purely defensive, i.e., destined to protect society from the encroachments of egocentric impulses to power, always ends up turning into a kind of superguardian which dominates everyone's lives. For every such order or system is limited by its confinement within a 'masculine' perspective.

> After long centuries of repression, the *logic du coeur*, the *ordo amoris* or "order of love", must now assert its right to exist alongside the logic of the head and the will to power. It is easy to condemn any movement to promote the *ordo amoris* on the grounds that it is engaging in antisocial behaviour whenever -- as is only natural -- it opposes turning into absolutes certain illusory values: the pedantic adherence to formalities, conscientious devotion to working or playing along with the system, and the idolatry of rules and regulations. That ideology of formalism and strict attention to duty which is still glorified in the centers of power -- and abused by the powerful in order to secure their own position -- is an outgrowth of a cultural attitude towards power which we must work to overcome (Richter, 1984, pp. 213 - 214).

The women in this study had looked to their religious traditions to provide guidance in the ongoing development of their relationship with self, others, and world. They discovered, however, that traditional religion, with its fixation on hierarchy and authoritarianism and its focus on irrelevancies, did not provide them with a way of transformation, and was itself closed to change. Jen put it this way:

> For them [traditional religion] Christ is not the liberator. They are afraid of that, because what might it do to the Church. It is better to have conformity, people following, than to have people stand up and say what they think. It's rocking the boat, it's going against the status quo, it's changing things. There is a strong push not to change things.

For these women, liberation into a sense of their authentic self and path of self-development became possible when they realized that it was necessary to "change things". When they experienced that their traditions were not meeting their needs, they began to take responsibility for their own transformation. Spirituality came to be seen in terms of process rather than form. Their tradition had emphasized self-repression, conformity to rules and gender roles,

and faith in, loyalty to, and dependence upon a system for salvation. These women re-visioned spirituality as self-affirmation, authentic relating, creative self-expression as a means of service, and personal responsibility for being aware and open to different perspectives, and for making choices about their own development.

**The responsibility for process.** Life is process. Life is possible *because* it is process; dynamic not static, rhythmic not random, patterned not chaotic. The art of living, of healing, of wholeness is realized in being awake and open to the integration that life requires. No system can do this for us.

> No organizational form . . . however rationally conceived, can ensure against dangers. It cannot be aware. It's only a set of words, a concept. We have to do the work. If there's not this love, this attention to other people and oneself, how can the rules take care of it? (Packer, 1990, p. *xxiv*).

Institutions can offer a feeling of safety, comfort, and security. When they become more important than the people they were meant to serve, it reveals that we are out of touch with the reality of spirituality as process. In the context of transforming, the distinction that promotes development is that it is not through membership in an organization, or loyal adherence to institutional rules and regulations that development occurs, but through being in touch with our own lived experience and being willing to undergo whatever transformation is required in order to live authentically. For the women in this study, this involved a commitment to awareness; a conscious process of examining their beliefs and assumptions, even when this was frightening or painful to do:

> In the course of spiritual growth all your concepts, ideas and beliefs have to be investigated and re-evaluated over and over again (Radha, 1980, p. 66).

It also meant facing their feelings of pain and insecurity and fear, realizing that this is a necessary part of the process of development:

> Woman has found that real power lies in working with or through emotions, not against them; and that resolution of pain lies in its acceptance, not in its denial. These are universal truths that are not sex-related (Lee, 1989, p. 153).

When spirituality becomes formalism, we imagine that God or Jesus will do it for us, be spiritual for us, save us from our own lives. Self-development in the context of Transforming requires that we undergo the process ourselves; that we open fully to the transformation of our own hearts and minds. It is in this process that we live a genuine spiritual life.[12] In The Sea of Faith, Cuppitt reminds us that this is really the challenge of the Christian life:

> The polarities and tensions of life ought not to be pushed away and resolved metaphysically, but should be internalized and experienced subjectively to the highest degree, so that we are forced to undergo the inner spiritual transformation which is Christianity's demand and promise . . . (1984, p. 229).

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[12] In The Kundalini Experience, Lee Sannella, M.D., makes the point this way: "Authentic spirituality . . . requires living on the basis of the intuitive recognition that there is no real separation from Life, or God, or The Transcendental Reality. . . . Authentic spirituality is thus down to earth. It begins and continues by taking responsibility for one's emotional recoil -- one's lovelessness, distrust, mood of betrayal, sense of conflict, and fear" (1987, pp. 120, 122).

The California State Psychological Association (CSPA) Task Force on Spirituality and Psychotherapy adopted the following definition of spirituality: "It has been said that spirituality is the 'courage to look within and to trust'. What is seen and what is trusted appears to be a deep sense of belonging, of wholeness, of connectedness, and of openness to the infinite". (Quoted in Rosenberg, Rand, & Asay (1985), Body, Self, & Soul: Sustaining Integration, p. 275).

For the women in this study, the process of transformation required that they confront and integrate traditional religious conditioning about their nature and destiny as women. Through this conditioning, they had become alienated from themselves, and lost control over their own development. When they took the courage to challenge this conditioning, they were eventually able to move beyond this system and begin to live authentically. Through undergoing their own transformation, these women are transforming their traditions, whether they intentionally set out to do so or not. Simply through living authentically, through affirming their wholeness, asserting their equality, and taking responsibility for their own lives, they are challenging a system which can only continue to exist if women remain silent and divided within themselves. That our present system needs to change is clear. Richter wrote the following comment in 1984. The figures would be even more disturbing today:

> Because of our boundless desire for power, more than one million dollars is spent each minute on armaments, while every day 40,000 children in poorer countries die in conditions of abject misery. Yet the nuclear age, with its dreadful risks, threatens the populations of the leading industrial nations as well. As if blind to the consequences, the super-powers are producing increasingly powerful nuclear weapons systems, the use of which -- could result only in mutual and global destruction (1984, p. *xi*).

Richter attributes this obsession with power, and its devastating results, to socialization into gender roles, in which the "masculine" principle is deified and the "feminine" principle devalued and repressed. I want to make it clear that I do not think men are to blame for the system we find ourselves in. Socialized from birth into self-division and destructive self-concepts, both men and women

are caught in a vicious circle which keeps being reproduced. While no one is to blame, both men and women are responsible for changing this system:

> [W]e all face a common task: to recognize that it will not destroy us to surrender some of our inflated ideals, but rather will give us an opportunity to develop a new, more meaningful human identity in which we can all share equally.
>
> [T]he individual cannot achieve this psychological reorientation alone. The overcoming of the "God-complex", of the myth of man's omnipotence, can be conceived only as a gradual and collective process in which people help each other break down their fears of helplessness and suffering, and their idealization of omnipotence (*ibid.*, pp. 121, 200).

As we have seen, the renewal of society and the further evolution of human consciousness require that we confront and move beyond the gender conditioning that has blocked both men's and women's development into full humanity. We have been taught that traditional gender roles are the "will of God", and it is this deception which continues to make change so difficult. Until our society no longer promotes this message, we will continue to realize its falseness through our pain. In Thou Shalt Not Be Aware: Society's Betrayal of the Child, Dr. Alice Miller, one of the world's foremost psychoanalysts, reminds us that the truth we discover through our own experience will endure.

> Change in society is brought about by uncovering and recognizing the truth in its entirety, not by manipulative methods based on acceptance of social taboos . . .
>
> To be sure, the truth that individuals discover through their pain can be crushed over and over again by the tomes of pedagogical, psychiatric, and theological wisdom, but it cannot be destroyed, for every newborn child has the capacity to discover the truth anew (Miller, 1984, pp. 303 - 304).

## E. Implications for Religion

> In every age old ideas about God to some extent die out, but new ideas have to be found. Old gods die in a sense. But at the beginning of every age, a new god has to be born. That is to say, new ideas, new formulations of the supreme truth have to be made. But we can never do without God, the reality of God. (Chaudhuri, 1990, pp. 19 - 20).

> The movement from an understanding of religion centred on dogmatic belief to one centred in spirituality and ethical activity may seem irresistable. Why do people then resist it so strongly? Because it is coupled with the admission, at last, that religion is entirely human, made by men for men. This admission is now inescapable, and the next stage in the development of religious thought will have to be based upon it. (Cuppitt, 1984, p. 265).

The women in this study moved from faith in and conformity to religious dogma, to an experience of spirituality as personal responsibility and an ongoing process of transformation. They left the old beliefs, images and roles behind not because they initially saw through them as human creations and so "lost faith", but because of their deep suffering in personally experiencing that traditional religious beliefs were unbearably destructive to their lives.

Cuppitt asks why people resist this movement from religion as dogma to religion as spirituality. We have seen the difficulties that the women who participated in this project experienced in making this transition. They did not resist this movement. Rather, going beyond the old system was an achievement that required courage, commitment, and sustained effort in overcoming the obstacles that traditional religion presents to revisioning religion as spirituality. There are people who do resist this transition, however. Cuppitt answers his own question as to why this is so by stating that these people would then have to

acknowledge that religion is man-made. We could ask another question. Why do people resist admitting that it's man-made?

Many people will resist this truth because of their personal insecurities. Fleeing freedom, they will cling to the illusion that they can find safety and certainty through allegiance to a cosmic Father figure who knows all the answers and who will save them from the inevitable pain involved in the process of self-development. Afraid to 'enter in', they will then try to prevent others from embracing the Living God, from entering fully into life. Once more they will try to take away the 'keys of knowledge'. They will re-assert that there is Divine Authority for the traditional images and dogma of their traditions, and they will claim to be the spokesmen for that Divine Authority. However, Cuppitt thinks that it is inevitable that we will recognize religion as a human creation, made, as he puts it, "by men for men". If this realization is inevitable, it will be because more and more women learn, like those in this study, that spirituality involves their self-affirmation of wholeness, assertion of equality, autonomy, and commitment to process, and that traditional religious dogma is fundamentally incompatible with this spirituality.

In growing beyond their traditions, the women who participated in this research came to understand that the male God-image is not sacrosanct, that religious characterizations of women as innately the moral inferiors and spiritual dependents of men are groundless, and that traditional gender roles are not divinely ordained, but human creations that have risen out of vested interests. As women learn that religion is a human creation reflecting vested interests, they will begin to ask some challenging questions, including: Whose interests

does it serve? Whose needs does it fail to meet? What changes are necessary in order for it to meet those needs?

Some people will resist admitting that religion is man-made because it opens these questions up for serious examination, and it will no longer be possible to refuse to dialogue with women on the old pretense that it is God who wills their silence. In spite of resistance to them, these questions will become unavoidable as more and more women learn that spirituality is not separate from their own self-development.

Presently, the pervasive influence of traditional religious beliefs is perhaps the foremost obstacle to women's freedom, equality, and empowerment as individuals. In times to come, if the Church is to retain its members it will at minimum have to broaden its imagery for God, acknowledge the validity of perceiving God as immanent as well as transcendent, use inclusive language, eliminate its program of sex-role socialization, address women's concerns and attend to women's issues, include women in all aspects of decision-making, and give them equal access to all religious roles. According to Weaver, the Church will also have to become an advocate for women in their quest for social justice:

> Are today's American Church leaders too identified with patriarchal structures to support the women's movement? . . . [I]f the American Catholic hierarchy does not identify the justice issues within the women's movement and support them, the Church will lose its members. (Weaver, 1986, p. 38).

Women's spirituality presents *the* fundamental challenge to traditional religion. If "the next stage in the development of religious thought" is to be a genuine development, it will have to respond to this challenge by undergoing

whatever transformation is required to truly meet women's spiritual needs as these needs are defined by women. Bohm and Peat's description of what constitutes a genuinely religious outlook points to what this transformation would entail:

> [A] truly religious attitude has to be free of rigid commitments in the tacit infrastructure of consciousness, so that all that is done comes out of creative perception. Religion could then be deeply concerned with an inquiry into whether, and how, a human being can come into contact with the ground of all. But at the same time, it would also be deeply concerned with the sociocultural and individual dimensions of human life and especially with the question of how and why human beings have such a strong tendency to be caught up in playing false, which, in current religious terminology, is called 'sin' or 'evil'. Above all, a religious attitude has to be compassionate, to acknowledge the ultimate value of the human being, and to realize that each individual shares in the general human conditioning over the ages to confuse and to play false (1987, p. 263).

To be a spiritual human being is to be an awakened human being. Spirituality is not about becoming gods or goddesses, but about getting in touch with our own wholeness; becoming full human persons. Women's contribution to the dialogue on spirituality, with its emphasis on lived experience, allows us to close the gap between sacred and profane; to heal the dualisms that are so pronounced in Western religious traditions, and that have led to such destructiveness. To someone outside this system, it can look odd indeed:

> I once heard a lecture by a wonderful old Zen philosopher, Dr. D.T. Suzuki. He stood up with his hands slowly rubbing his sides and said [commenting on Christianity], 'God against man. Man against God. Man against nature. Nature against man. Nature against God. God against nature -- very funny religion!' (Campbell, 1988, p. 56).

Perhaps another reason that we resist seeing that religion is 'man'-made is that then we are faced with the responsibility for what we have created. From the women in this study, we learn how terribly destructive the present religious and social conditioning into gender roles is to the human spirit. We also learn that development requires responsibility. We cannot leave it up to God.

> To abdicate one's own moral responsibility, to tolerate crimes against humanity, to leave everything to someone else, the father-ruler-king-computer, is the only irresponsibility. To deny that a mistake has been made when its results are chaos visible and tangible on all sides, that is irresponsibility (Greer, 1970, p. 19).

> The paternalistic structure which says that God will put it right in the end - - when God is an invention of that structure -- is self-defeating (Lee, 1989, p. 207).

We need to do our part in the transformation of our religious and social institutions to create a more just, a more humane world for us all. If this can seem an overwhelming task, we can learn from these women that our primary responsibility is self-transformation, the way of our own healing, becoming whole. From them we learn that we need to be willing to go through whatever is required in order to live authentically --

> The only obligation you have is to fulfill the purpose for which you have come into life. This obligation is to fulfill the Divine within, and to share it with others (Radha, 1980, p. 35).

When we realize that our religion is a human creation, perhaps we will begin to attend to what it means to be truly human, and focus our energy on creating a society in which humanity becomes a blessing to the world, and humans to each other. This is not idealism, as much as it is pragmatism. If we fail to do this, we soon will not have a world. And from these women, we learn that we have

the power to choose the better way. Our individual choice is very important, because we create our world together.

> Personal growth and happiness do not occur within a vacuum of courage, energy, and images of the possible. There are no individual solutions. My own growth and attainment of a new world will be slowed or stopped by the interference of a non-supportive environment. Only shared vision and commitment will bring about a new society (Weaver, 1982, p. 253).

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## Appendix A

## POST INTERVIEW QUESTIONNAIRE

**1. After reading my summary of our conversations, do you think that I have understood your experience of conflict with traditional religion, and represented in a way that is true to your experience?**

a) Yes.
b) Yes.
c) Yes, I feel the "translation" from me to you, was made with accuracy and clarity.
d) I feel my experience has been understood by its faithful reporting. I also identify with the other women's experiences and feel even more understood and valued both in my uniqueness and in the common themes present in all five of us.
e) Yes you have understood my experience of conflict with my religion.

**2. Are there parts of my summary which are particularly meaningful to you?**

a) Yes. It was helpful and meaningful to see the headings you chose for discussion and how you drew in the material to illustrate! To read others' stories was very meaningful -- my material became relevant to a "global" story . . . again! It was meaningful to see my words . . . (unabridged!).
b) Yes. The portion in which I expressed my becoming whole. The section on spirituality as process was particularly meaningful. The women in this study through their sharing of their stories are expressing their spirituality.
c) The concluding responses I gave to your final question, still reflected my feelings today.
d) All of it is meaningful in that each part contributes to an integrated reflextion of myself that brings about an understanding of spirituality as my being in process.
e) Yes, the meaning of spirituality explained through the development of the 4 themes.

**3. Are there any things that you think I misinterpreted or didn't emphasize enough?**

Consensual "No".

**4. Do you feel that you benefited from your participation in this research? If so, can you describe briefly what it is that you feel you have gained?**

a) Yes!
- I was delighted and thrilled to participate!
- I am more aware of what I have integrated to date - that's exciting!
- I benefited from reviewing my process on this subject and feel the movement. I had to stop and get in touch with it. Material came up again and I saw it with new eyes -- and so I am encouraged to continue. Something good is happening.
- I gained a renewed sense of belonging, sharing, of community with you and these other women! I am not alone!
- I have a greater appreciation of my abilities & skills to express and create. The longing to write is yapping at my heels!
- I can experience a more substantial wholeness about me.
- I watched you blossom which gave me great pleasure!

b) Yes. I have learned that I have a valid & worthy voice. I could relate to the other women participants through the sharing of their experiences with traditional religion. I gained more insight as to how traditional religion has affected all aspects of my being.

c) I felt a "catharsis" through the process of introspection and memory searching. I realized insights I had not previously been aware of. I felt a cleansing and releasing and an enrichment as a result of this process.

d) I have greatly benefited!!! I have gained new insights, a new integration of how I live my life now in the present. I feel more valued within my self since my journey is heard and maybe by expressing myself and believing in my experience others can also benefit just as I feel better understood because I identify with the other women in this study.

e) Yes, I feel I have benefited from my participation in this research; in more than one way. First of all just relating my experience to an active and open listener has made me feel good, then my reading the experience of others I don't feel so alone. I have also gained some insights of what spirituality is.

**5. Do you have any other comments about our conversations, or the summary?**

a) I was excited as I read it. I felt the energy and movement from each contributor and enjoyed how the responses were poured into each heading/topic: It all fit! Be sure as many as possible hear the messages. Write an article or a book -- be sure it goes on the shelf at St. Stephen's. Turn this music up please!

- Our conversations were very special. To be able to share at such depths is unique! Great moments (hours!!)

- I admire your efforts and creativity to let these stories perk over time and then allow them to flow, without any change in flavour, into such a creative framework.

- I appreciate your patience and persistence in following through on your hunches & senses and coaxing out what you knew was there!

- Thank you for you!

b) I have enjoyed, & learned more about me from our conversations. I feel validated and appreciate that I was able to assist with this topic "religious tradition" and wish you success with your thesis! When I heard the announcement about your study I was eager to participate. I think your summary was well put and very appropriate.

c) No further comments.

d) I am extremely grateful . . . I feel honoured and valued in my person as who I am and continue to be --
I feel and know that by continuing to ask questions I eventually glimpse beautiful "kaleidoscopic" visions -- that are answers for where I am now at.

- This process has been for me like "journal writing" -- a process of reflexion and renewal -- with the dimension of "individual counselling" and "support group" all rolled into one. Thank you -- thank you Joanne.

e) I have to thank you for asking for my input in this enlightening research. I hope it will help others towards their personal growth in self-affirmation, self-assertion, self-determination and finally transformation into a more fully aware being who can relate effectively and therefore create better worlds around us.

## Appendix B

### Autobiographical Postscript

> Woe unto you, lawyers! [i.e., clergy and theologians] for ye have taken away the key of knowledge: ye entered not in yourselves, and them that were entering in ye hindered (Luke 11:52).
>
> Jesus said: The Pharisees and the Scribes have received the keys of Knowledge, they have hidden them. They did not enter, and they did not let those [enter] who wished. But you, become wise as serpents and innocent as doves (Log 39, The Gospel According to Thomas) (Guillamont, 1959).

In my own life, religion and psychology were the two contexts in which I looked for knowledge of the "inner life", the life of significance and meaning; for the understanding of myself, my relations to others, and my 'place in the universe'. For the most part, I found the "keys of Knowledge" hidden.

There are some personal experiences with religious tradition that I cannot yet speak about. I can not find the words to communicate them; and perhaps some things will forever remain unsayable. Here, I am attempting to describe events which have profoundly affected my life course, and sense of myself as a person. Within the limits of this space I can at best give only a sketch of some significant moments and impressions. Although I feel some reluctance about sharing these without the protection of anonymity, I also feel that it is appropriate to include my own story as part of this project.

I was raised as a Roman Catholic. My grandmother and mother were devout; very involved in the Church, very orthodox. I was baptized, took first communion, was confirmed. I went to Mass every Sunday and took catechism

from the nuns during the week. In The Power of Myth, Joseph Campbell has this to say about being raised in the Roman Catholic tradition:

> I was brought up as a Roman Catholic. Now, one of the great advantages of being brought up a Roman Catholic is that you're taught to take myth seriously and to let it operate on your life and to live in terms of these mythic motifs (1988, p. 10).

When I read this, I was reminded once again of how very different men's and women's experiences can be of the 'same' tradition. I wonder if Campbell would have been able to consider the power of mythic motifs on the Catholic consciousness such an advantage if he had been a woman in that tradition? Certainly as a Catholic female I was familiar with the myth of the Fall, and learned to consider my nature and social situation as a woman in terms of the image of Eve. Living with reference to that image meant accepting that my existence was conditional to that of men's, that my nature was inferior and flawed, and hence my social subordination justified. I found it very destructive for myself and observed it to be so for other women.

Another distinctive feature of Catholicism is the emphasis that it places on the sacraments, around which religious life is centred. In this tradition, power to administer the sacraments is reserved for male clergy. Access to 'legitimate' spiritual experience is thereby available only through these 'guardians of the faith'.

> A sacrament is more than a symbol. The perception of symbols leads us from the many to the One, from the transitory to the permanent, but not from appearance to reality. This belongs to the sacramental experience (Gaskell, 1960, p. 642).

My interpretation of Gaskell's distinction between symbol and sacrament is that symbols point to a potential experience, while sacraments are an initiation into that experience. To use an analogy, according to his definition a symbol is like a finger pointing at the moon. A sacrament is a vehicle that takes us to the moon[1]. I have discovered that as far as my sense of myself as a woman is concerned, moving "from appearance to reality" in patriarchal traditions involved reclaiming and validating my own experiences. With this in mind, I present the autobiographical material that follows in the form of a sacramental journey.

**Sacramental Journey:** The need to understand what is real, and true, and of lasting value -- in other words, the religious or spiritual quest -- has been an ongoing part of my life since I was very young. This quest is natural to all of us, part of what it means to be a human being. In my own case it became an intense concern, partly due I am sure to an event which occurred when I was five years old.

**Baptism:** I was five years old. I had to travel far from home for an operation and was in the hospital. In those days they used ether as an anesthetic. I had probably been told something about being 'put to sleep', but was completely unprepared for what actually took place. I was lying on a bed in an empty room when a strange looking man with a mask over his face walked up to me, leaned over, put a black thing over my mouth and nose and pressed down. I couldn't

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[1] This is not a necessary distinction. In The Concise Oxford Dictionary (1990), a definition of sacrament is: "a sacred influence, symbol, etc." Religious symbols are intended, in fact, to serve a sacramental function. As was pointed out in Chapter Two of this thesis, religious symbols have had a profound influence on Western civilization.

breathe! I fought desperately to breathe! Terrified, certain I was going to die, my mind rushed to God, and in my mind I cried out to God: "Why are you killing me? I haven't done anything wrong!"

When I woke up after the operation, though I could not have explained it or put it into words in any way I felt a sense of communion with God. Through these events, I believe the seed was planted that I had a relationship to God and that it was very important to understand and develop that relationship. This was my baptism into the spiritual search. My stay in the hospital was a baptism in another way. Recovering after the operation, I began to help out with other children on the ward. I thought the doctors had healed me and I wanted to be a healer like them. One day the nurses told me that I was going to make a good nurse someday. Then I began to notice that all the doctors were men. Women became nurses, and their job was to provide support services. I wanted to be involved in the actual healing part, but that meant I would have to become a doctor, and that meant I would have to be a man. I did not know why this was how things were, but I did feel that it was not because that was how things had to be. I felt there were some things going on between men and women that were not right. I felt like telling people that I wanted to be a doctor but I was afraid to. I was afraid that they would laugh at me, or worse yet -- and though I did not have the word for it I knew the feeling -- that they would patronize me. And so my first conscious awareness of God and my first conscious awareness of sexism dawned at about the same time. Little could I have imagined how intimately they would become linked in my experience. At this point I would like to provide a definition of sexism that describes what I mean by this term:

> A discriminative attitude towards others which discounts any considerations of intrinsic worth or character and judges capabilities or assigns roles solely on a basis of gender. It is primarily an attitude manifested by the male sex toward the female, and based upon assumptions of superiority that are generally unconscious or at least unconfessed. *Feminist* critiques of sexism have been so successful that today few males would have the temerity to flaunt the attitude publicly, although it clearly continues to flourish in domestic circumstances as well as in many institutions and professions (Holroyd, 1989, p. 227).

**Holy communion:** We lived a few miles outside of town in a small subdivision, surrounded by wooded hills. The hills were my playground and I was outside exploring them at every opportunity. They delighted my body and soul: I ran and climbed and creeped and rolled and stalked; I smelled the grass and trees and earth and wildflowers; I heard birds singing and squirrels scolding and frogs and insect noises; I felt the sun and wind and rain and saw the beauty of the earth. In the hills, my imagination had free rein; I was an adventurer, an explorer, an Indian, a pioneer, a prospector. My love for nature deepened. There was a particularly beautiful hill with a large stand of Ponderosa pines. It was my favourite place, and I would sit under the trees, sun shining, soft breeze, the beauty of the wildflowers in the open meadow. At moments I felt the most exquisite oneness with nature, a sense of deep, vibrant communion. To me it felt like the spirit of God. I needed this healing, because in the Church, and as a result of experiences in my family, I did not get a good feeling about God. Over and over, in ways subtle and overt, I learned that God does not like women.

**Penance (for the 'Original Sin of Being Born Female' in a white male system) (Schaef, 1985):**

(1) My mother had been a teacher, but left her job when she married, and focused her energies on raising children and serving her husband. In the Catholic marriage vows at that time, the wife had to pledge to obey her husband, and my father held her to it. Their marriage was very much one of dominance on my father's part and submission on my mother's. I know that my mother tried her best in a marriage that she recently characterized as an experience of extreme emotional suffering. When I was about eight years old, my mother became very depressed. People called it a "nervous breakdown". She went away to Vancouver and was gone for many months. When she returned, she tried even harder to adjust to her subordinate position. Catholics do not divorce, and wives are responsible for the quality of their marriage. If women suffer in their marriages, it is not a signal to seek greater understanding or to take corrective action. Suffering, especially for women, was a virtue -- the one legitimate way in which women could imitate Christ. Later, my father told me that they sent my mother away because she was "crazy".

(2) I started having a nightmare that recurred again and again. In the nightmare, I am surrounded by darkness. I feel a sense of evil permeating the darkness, and become very frightened. A slow, pulsing red glow begins, and I know that it is coming. I am extremely frightened but can't move. The figure approaches. The round body is clothed in the black robes of a priest; the head is hollow and made of glass. The red light is pulsing from the centre of the head. The figure glides soundlessly towards me, and as it is almost upon me the

feeling of evil and fear is overwhelming. I wake up screaming. It got so bad that I was afraid to go to sleep at night. I decided that if the nightmare happened again I was going to try to make it stop. The nightmare happened again. This time, as the figure approaches I tell it to stop. It keeps coming. I run around behind it. It has a key in its back. There's a moment of hope. 'It's mechanical'. I reach over to take out the key. The key disappears. The figure quickly turns, divides in two, then four, then eight, rapidly reproducing itself until within seconds there are countless numbers of them. I wake in terror. I can't even scream.

(3) I went to Catechism all through elementary school. What I learned from these classes, and from the Bible, and Church on Sunday, is that women are insignificant, and they are bad and shameful. At the Mass on Sunday, there was only men at the alter; the collection was done by men. Women were supposed to work hard behind the scenes, and not expect public recognition. God and Jesus Christ are male. The Virgin Mary was totally obedient and self-effacing and women are supposed to be like her. Women play a minor role in the Bible except for the Fall into sin, and when they were mentioned it was often in criticism or condemnation or to remind women of their place. I learned that women are responsible for original sin; for evil coming into the world. They can't be trusted because they are morally weaker and less intelligent than men. The Devil tempted Eve and because she was proud and ambitious she sinned. Then she corrupted Adam by manipulating him sexually. Women are like Eve. Sex is bad, and women are somehow associated with sex, and responsible for sex and the bad things that happen because of it. Sex is shameful. Bodies are

shameful. Breasts and pregnant bellies are shameful. This is what I learned from religion, directly and indirectly. My mother learned the same thing when she was young.

(4) I was almost eleven years old. My mother was eight or nine months pregnant. I was hoping that the baby would be a girl so that I could have a younger sister. I was fascinated by the fact that a baby could form inside my mother's belly, and I was curious to know how the baby got out. I thought that it had to come out between the legs but I couldn't figure out where or how. The baby was so big and any possible opening was so small. I realized that there must be some amazing thing about a woman's body that I didn't know. Having a baby was like a miracle, and yet it wasn't. I wanted to know how a woman's body worked; how a woman gave birth. I asked my mother, "How does the baby come out?" The question was very important. My mother looked uncomfortable. Then she said, "It comes out the side". I was astonished, and then confused. I asked, "But how can it come out the side? There's no opening there". My mother said "The side just opens up and the baby comes out". I couldn't believe it. It would be so unnatural, so freakish. Then I caught on. I wasn't supposed to ask any more questions. In my heart it felt like something died.

**Confirmation:** I was fifteen. I no longer went to Church regularly, but I longed to know God, to know truth. I tried to discuss this with my mother. I told her that I had noticed everyone talking about God -- the priests, the sisters, the people at Church -- but that none of them seemed to know what they were talking about. It seemed to be a word they used without really knowing what

they meant by it. I told her that I didn't want God to be just a word, I wanted to *experience* God, to really know God. My mother was taken aback, and visibly distressed. She explained that what I was saying was dangerous and blasphemous, and that it was important for me to have faith. I didn't agree with her, but her worry made me uncertain and uneasy. All the old warnings and threats from catechism came back to me -- that if I didn't have faith I was in mortal sin, and if I died like that I'd go straight to Hell. At that moment I decided that if I had to have faith in God, I was going to trust that God was loving and kind. That meant He wasn't going to punish me for trying to get to know Him, even if that meant I had to look outside the Church to find God. But I didn't know where to look. During the next few years I lived what seemed a normal teenage life; I had friends, was involved in social activities, and did well enough in school to get a scholarship to University. However, though I didn't reveal it to anyone, I was suffering terribly inside. I experienced how poisoned relationships were between men and women in general, and sensed that much of this was as a result of what religious teachings tell us about who men and women are by 'nature', what their function is, and how they are to relate with each other. Men are important, women are not; men are valued, women are not; men are supposedly rational, intelligent and objective while women are irrational, emotional, and overly subjective; men are to be autonomous, women are to be dependent; a man gets to be an individual, to choose a career, to have greater freedom, while a woman must lose herself in her husband, be identified by his name and his profession, and live to serve him and her children. Men are the major figures in history, literature, art, music, science and religion. People

assume that it is because men are more creative, talented and intelligent than women. I wanted to love, but I couldn't trust. It seemed that for many men, boasting about sexual conquests was more important than relating with women. The sexual double standard became obvious. Men are supposed to sow their wild oats, women are responsible for setting the limits. I couldn't quite reconcile this with what I learned in Church about women being morally inferior to men. However, it was clear that if a young woman got pregnant and wasn't married, she was the one that people judged and blamed, not the father of the child.

I didn't experience much sanity out there in the 'real' world, but as a woman I was not supposed to question it; to speak about what I saw or thought or felt. I was supposed to be silent. I learned this from the Church and the Bible; I learned it by observing my parent's relationship. If I did speak, I would have my point of view undermined, my perspective discounted, my opinions ridiculed. I would, in other words, have my sanity questioned. I had to continually defend myself (silently, in my own mind) against the pervasive messages that women were inferior to men both spiritually, that is essentially, and in terms of their human qualities. This certainly did not fit my actual experiences of men and women. I could only hold the silent belief that there was something crazy about traditional religion and cultural assumptions in order not to lose confidence in the validity of my own perceptions. This was difficult to do, though, because if it was true that women were not innately inferior to men, this meant that our religious and social systems were deeply corrupt. Though I was intuiting and feeling this, it was at this point still unthinkable. This was because I had no language or conceptual framework to support my perceptions, and because I

could not comprehend that a system so terribly destructive to both men and women as that of male dominance and female subordination would be created if there were other options. At times I felt such despair that it was hard to function normally. What kept me holding on was that I knew I was going to University. I assumed that there I would meet people who were wise; who would understand what I was experiencing and could help me make sense out of it. I enrolled in a psychology class, hoping to gain insight into what I was experiencing. I also thought the professor might be able to help me personally. In class, the professor talked on and on about white rats and black boxes and salivating dogs. I realized after the first class that I couldn't ask him for help; that he would not understand what I was experiencing. I knew that I really needed someone to talk to, that I couldn't hold myself together much longer, but I couldn't find anyone I could trust. I was afraid that they would think I was crazy. I knew that what I was experiencing was valid, and I felt that if I went to the hospital and asked for help they would try to pacify me, and get me to deny what I was experiencing so that I could "adjust", like my mother had adjusted. I realized I would have to try to heal myself.

I had a private room in a University student residence. I went to classes and made a few friends, but needed to spend a lot of time alone, just letting myself open up to the pain I was feeling. Sometime during that year I got a copy of the *Tao Te Ching*. Reading it for the first time was a revelation. Raised in the Christian tradition, I had been trained to think about questions of truth and meaning in terms of rigidly dualistic categories of right and wrong, good and bad. As an introduction to paradox, to the realization that truth could be

expressed through holding two contradictory ideas at the same time, it gave me a wonderful sense of mental freedom. It also led to my abiding interest in Eastern thought.

I made it through my first year of University, and during that following summer, got a job as a trail guide. Being outside in the mountains on horseback all day long helped me to heal emotionally, and I was able to return to University that fall. During that year, I learned to meditate. What attracted me to meditation was that it was a way of working directly with my mind and emotions, without having to agree to any particular beliefs. It was practical; it was experiential. It was something that I could actually *do* to take responsibility for my spiritual development without having to rely on someone else. Within a short time I began to experience many physical and emotional benefits as a result of regular practice. The following year I left University, as I had decided I wanted to learn to teach meditation. By this time my mother had returned to teaching and she financed me when I went to the United States to take the necessary training. When I returned to British Columbia I worked for the Provincial organization of a meditation society for one year. I traveled throughout B.C., training people to meditate. Then I moved to Ontario, and for three years I worked in various parts of the province giving lectures and classes in yoga and meditation. It was very rewarding work. It was also challenging, as there was a lot of traveling, it was difficult to have a regular routine, and it was hard to survive financially. Eventually I moved back to British Columbia in order to have a more settled life. I worked as a secretary, and traveled regularly to the United States to continue my training in yoga. During this time I read

Eastern philosophy, Western psychology, particularly Jung's works, and Western Christian mysticism.

Eventually I returned to University. My first year back at University I took a course in religious studies. It happened to be taught by the head of the Department. During the year, we were told that we would be required to write a major paper, and that we could write on whatever we found personally fascinating. I chose to write about the immanence of God. I used material from Carl Jung and Paul Tillich and the Christian mystics. I was very careful to make it clear that I was not suggesting that God was *only* immanent, *only* within creation. My argument was that by focusing exclusively on God as transcendent to the world, Christianity had led to an alienation of humans from nature and from their own psyches. I felt that it was necessary to recognize that the Divine could be thought of as being *both* immanent and transcendent, and that by honouring God as immanence, the dualisms within Christianity could begin to be healed. The argument was fairly conservative and balanced, I thought. The only place I stepped out on a limb was with the title. I thought that because we traditionally used the term God to refer to God in the transcendent aspect, it might be fair play to use the term Goddess to refer to the immanent aspect[2]. Therefore, I titled the paper "Return of the Goddess". This was in 1981, and the term was not in common use. I was using it poetically. That was the only aspect of my paper that I imagined might cause any problems. I had only recently been introduced to the ideas I wrote about, and they were important to

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[2] Divine Mother worship is nothing more than accepting creation in the smallest detail and in all people (Radha, 1980, p. 29).

me. I was excited about them, because I felt that an acceptance by Christianity of the immanence of the Divine would allow me to reconcile with the Christian faith, which I had wanted to do. I looked forward to a dialogue with the professor. When I received my paper back, it was graded A-minus, and accompanied by three pages of comments in heavy red ink. I was told, among other things, that what I wrote was dangerous and heretical, that I was a pagan and that he feared for my soul, and that my spirituality "would not even begin until I cut the umbilical cord to the mother". I was shocked by this response, and really devastated by the comments. Rather than a dialogue, or even a focus on my ideas, I received an attack on my person. It brought back feelings of fear and memories of intimidation I experienced in my religious upbringing. The old doubt about losing my soul and going to Hell came back. I was surprised at my response, as I thought I had dealt with those issues in the past. I realized what a profound effect early conditioning can have, and that it is sometimes necessary to face old fears over and over again before we free ourselves from them. Later, I reflected that perhaps his response came from him having an "umbilical cord" attached to fixed ideas. As a result of his comments, however, I no longer felt hopeful that there was any room within the Christian tradition to express and share my personal experience of the Divine. His response silenced me. I could not bring myself to address my relationship with traditional religion again until several years ago, when I began work on this project.

In my third year at University I chose to major in Psychology because of my interest in *understanding* people, myself included. In my fourth year, I took a course in Clinical Psychology taught by the head of the Department. He said he

would begin the course by spending the first week reviewing the history of psychology. At the end of one lecture, he told us that in the next class he would be concluding the discussion of Freud, and then would talk about Freud's disciples, including Jung and Adler. In the reading that I had done on my own before returning to University, I had found Jung's work particularly meaningful. His concepts of the four functions of thinking, feeling, intuition and sensation and their connection with personality types, his understanding of mythology as stories that reveal patterns of human behaviour, his focus on individuation as an ongoing process, and his recognition of the spiritual quest as a valid concern of psychology were just some of the ideas I found helpful as guides in my own search to understand human behaviour. Therefore, I really looked forward to the next class, when we would be discussing, so I assumed, some of these ideas.

The professor began the lecture by talking about Freud. When he finished, he said: "Freud had two main disciples, Jung and Adler. Jung is of historical interest only. The only contribution he has made to modern psychology is the concept of extroversion and introversion". And that was it. On to Adler. The professor was a committed behaviourist, I later learned. Overall, I found the class useful as an introduction to behaviourism, but not particularly helpful as an introduction to the larger field of clinical psychology. Once again, in one of the two areas where I looked for an understanding of the "inner life", I was being given the message that my perspective, what I thought was significant and of value, was meaningless.

That year I also took a psychology class in "Sex roles and sex differences" (sic). It was my first exposure to a body of material that made a distinction

between sex and gender (though not in the title of the class), that addressed gender as a product of socialization, and that called into question the assumption that men and women are innately very different, with men, on the whole, being at least a bit superior. I cannot express the relief I felt at discovering that these assumptions were being opened to exploration and discussion. Finally, there was a field of knowledge developing that would expose the "poisonous pedagogy" (Miller, 1984, p. 306) that women have been subjected to, and that is ultimately destructive to both sexes. This course provided a perspective that was essential in order for me to make sense of my experience in a culture in which I was supposed to be at home but in which, because I was a woman, I felt a profound sense of alienation. It reassured me that my sense of estrangement was largely a result of "being sane in insane places" (Rosenhan, 1984, p. 117).

During the next few years after graduating from University, I worked and continued taking classes in yoga. I also engaged in a process of dealing with the anger that I began to feel now that my perceptions of women's oppression were being confirmed by theory and research on gender issues. The greatest pain and anger that I had to deal with came from my sense that gender conditioning, and much of what was particularly damaging in it as far as my particular experience was concerned, was the result of traditional religious beliefs about men and women functioning as unconscious assumptions in society, that people are conditioned to internalize as natural and inevitable patterns of human relating.

**Holy Orders:** The spiritual quest was a central focus of my life, and I was raised by a very orthodox, Catholic mother. This made me particularly vulnerable to religious teachings. I had internalized the messages that

spirituality, for women, meant being silent, submissive, and subordinate, and so I did not assert myself in situations where I was abused. In this way, my desire to relate, to love and be loved, was the source of my bondage and actually prevented me from creating authentic relationships. This realization hurt terribly. When I became aware that it was primarily through my desire to be 'spiritual' that I had lost a sense of myself, I felt sorrow, and rage. I was extremely angry with God. I both loved God and hated God at the same time. I was going through tremendous inner turmoil. For days there were moments when I felt extreme anguish, but I couldn't be indifferent to God. This inner conflict was so intense, and I felt such helplessness at being unable to resolve it, that at one moment of extreme inner tension, I simply accepted it. I let go; I sat down quietly, closed my eyes; and entered the silence. Later, I wrote down what happened next:

God spoke to me this morning,
So softly
It was as if it was
Silence itself that was speaking.

"I can never be possessed,
I can never be owned.

Not by love can I be possessed or owned;
Not by hate can I be cast aside.

I am that I am.

I can be understood;
I can be lived.
Speak the truth with a peaceful heart;
There am I."

I came to understand that, in spite of everything that I had been through, my focus was still too much "out there", and too much on the future. As a result of my religious conditioning, I was still seeking for a relationship with some "absolute" outside myself, that was always out of reach, because I still did not have a strong enough sense of myself to realize that rather than 'seeking' relationships, I could create them, or not create them; that I could choose; that I could speak; that I could begin to be real, rather than trying to conform to images that I had internalized of who I had to be. Rather than looking for God 'out there', I learned that it was my own life that I needed to be grounded more deeply in, reconciled more fully to, through "speaking the truth with a peaceful heart". Previously, I was not saying what I needed to say, and so there was no truth. Then when I began to speak, there was so much repressed anger and emotions that I had to deal with, that there was no peace. Now, I am more able to bring the two together, and it is a guide to behaviour that I am learning to honour. The Holy Spirit is here and now and a Presence with us when we are grounded yet open in the truth of our own experience.